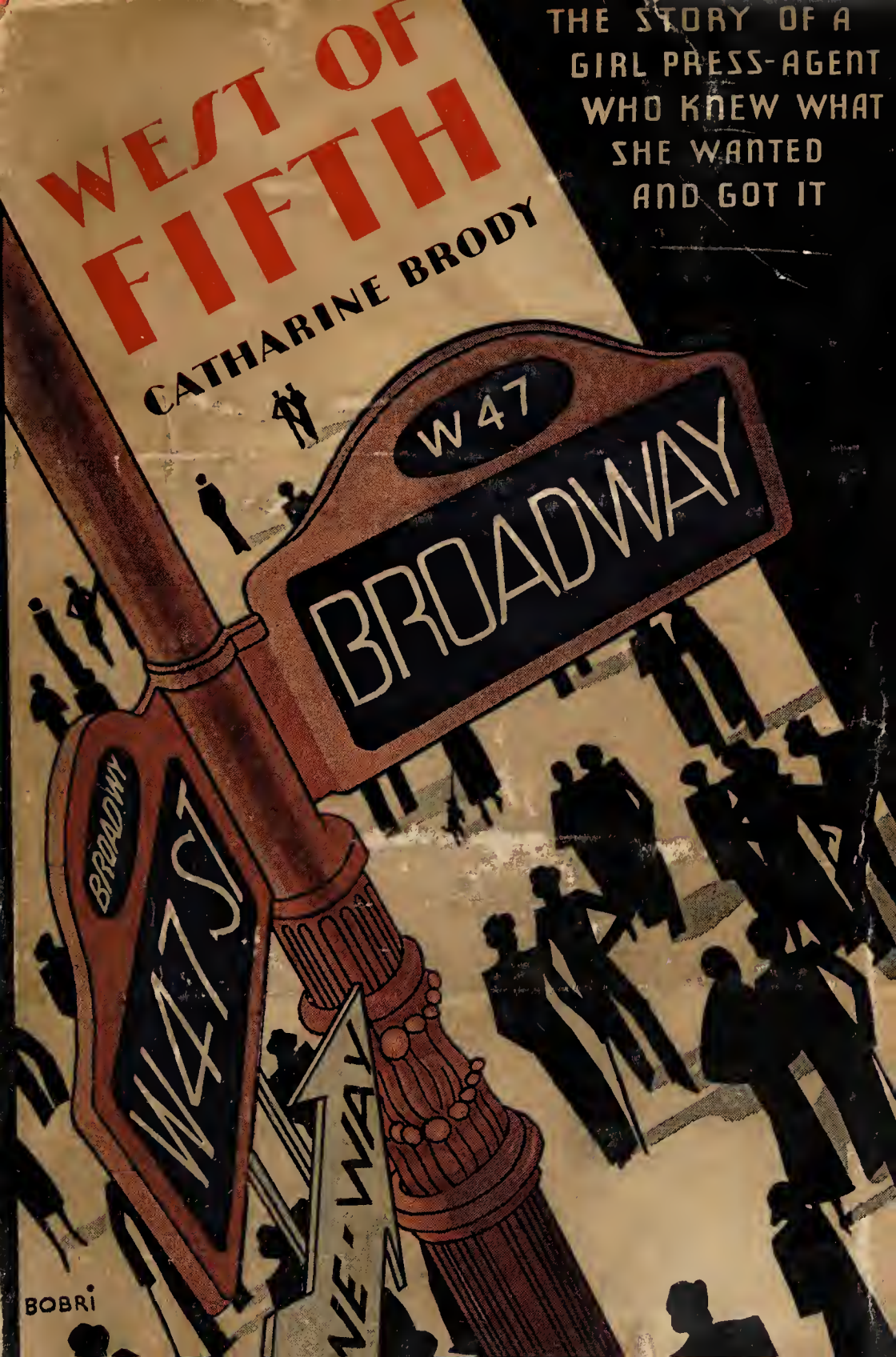
WEST OF FIFTH

THE STORY OF A GIRL PRESS-AGENT WHO KNEW WHAT SHE WANTED AND GOT IT

CATHARINE BRODY



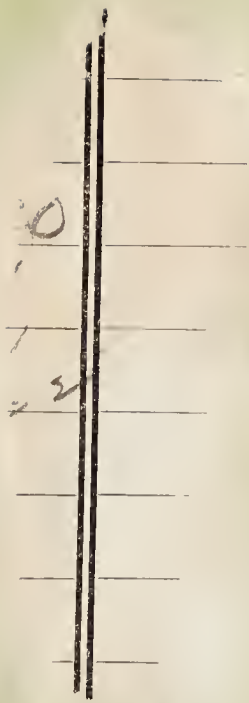
WEST OF FIFTH is the story of a girl press agent, one of New York's feminine go-getters, who earns her own living, gets her own man and butters her own bread in the frantic world between Broadway and Fifth Avenue.

Grace Kline, educated in upper Manhattan, went to live in the mid-town section just west of Fifth. She did motion picture and dramatic publicity. She was beautiful and smart, capable and shrewd. During hours she pounded out on her typewriter appropriate honeyed phrases about film stars and what a famous beauty thought about motherhood. After hours she was one of the "other women" whose names occasionally flair into headlines as co-respondents. She never had any doubt as to what she wanted, and what she wanted she always got, whether it was a better job or some other girl's husband.

Here is a glamorous phase of New York life laid bare in a novel of constantly mounting interest, by the author of *Babe Evanson.*

5

As 1



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2019 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

https://archive.org/details/westoffifth0000unse

WEST OF FIFTH

BOOKS BY CATHARINE BRODY

BABE EVANSON

WEST OF FIFTH

West of Fifth

BY

CATHARINE BRODY

MCMXXX

DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC.

GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK

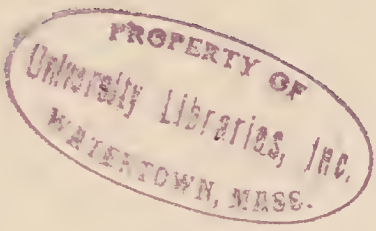
PRINTED AT THE *Country Life Press*, GARDEN CITY, N. Y., U. S. A.

COPYRIGHT, 1930
BY CATHARINE BRODY
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Book I

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE

CHAPTER ONE



EVEN during the latter hour of lunch time the editorial room of the *Dress Daily* could never be quiet. The feel of the presses stayed like audible dust in the air and now and then heavy trucks, passing by, seemed to jar the building. But the desks of the Fashion Department were void of life; a solitary man pecked at a machine in the Woolens Department. All the stenographers except one were gossiping in the dressing room.

When the entrance door opened a draught made this one girl at the typewriter scowl and clutch her papers, and a piece of paper in the Fashion Department blew up and fell listlessly to the floor. Such vagrant sheets strewed the ground in poor imitation of autumn leaves.

The girl looked up. Because of a way of carrying her head, all her features, which were regular, seemed to

tilt upward, even her small, cruelly firm mouth. She saw a man from the Advertising Department followed by a young woman in a sealskin coat. At once she made her shoulders uncompromising and began to click her typewriter. Her desk was first from the entrance; people insisted on stopping at it for directions.

The story about an exhibition of blouses—which, as a great favor, Mr. Milford had permitted her to visit during lunch time and write about herself—sprang into being willy-nilly. All the same, she had noticed the other girl.

"We might—wait—over there, Joe," this girl said, with a pause before and after the word "wait" that emphasized it slightly.

They sat down in the Fashion Department, facing the girl at the typewriter, and she heard a low murmur of conversation. She finished a page, busily rolled it from the machine and put it on the desk. She inserted another sheet and sat gazing at it, conscious in spite of herself of the voices, especially the low, deliberate, penetrating voice of the girl. Somebody looking for a job, she thought. All sorts of girls came to Mr. Milford for jobs. Then she shrugged, and wondered why she was bothering her head about this particular girl. "Anyhow, it can't be my job she's after. Nobody would want this lousy job."

Her fingers were still moving almost subconsciously on the keys when she heard the voice of the advertising man behind her, a bit deferential, for she had frightened him with coldness once before. "Can you tell me when Mr. Milford will be in?"

She glanced at him. "He never tells *me*," she said, with a slight smile to remove the pertness. The man smiled back, a little humbly, and she relented. "He usually comes in about this time."

The man seemed to take this as an entering wedge. He beckoned to the girl in the sealskin coat. She walked over, her enormous eyes, deep brown pools, so wide open, so steadily focused, that they appeared to cling to whatever was in the range of vision, fastening themselves ahead of her on the other girl's face. Her head was bent forward, as if with the weight of her eyes, and so were her shoulders.

"Miss Vestry," said the advertising man, "I want you to meet Miss Kline. Miss Vestry is Mr. Milford's secretary—and assistant," he concluded with unction.

Miss Kline made a move to draw her right hand out of its sealskin cuff. Miss Vestry only smiled briefly.

"Now I have to go downstairs for a while, Grace," said the advertising man. "Miss Vestry will take care of you."

The large eyes moved slowly toward him and clung to him.

"But—you'll be back, Joe? You know—I want you—to introduce me."

There was a curious halt between groups of her words which Anita Vestry had noticed.

"Sure, I'll be back."

The two girls faced each other only for a second. Miss Vestry turned to her machine. She could feel the eyes of this Miss Kline lingering on the back of her head, but she could not think of anything to say to her,

even if she had wished to speak. She felt impatient, as if she wanted to shake her off. "Why doesn't she go and sit down?" Miss Kline took a few steps and stood by the side of the desk. The first page of the story lay face up. Her eyes immediately attached themselves to it. She picked up the page casually. Holding it at arm's length, with her head cocked to one side, she looked it over. When she was through she put the page down without comment, glanced at the continuation in the typewriter, then sauntered over to a chair by Mr. Milford's desk.

The breath that Miss Vestry had been holding in was expelled through her wide nostrils, distended to reject it. She seemed to rise several inches in her chair as, grabbing the sheet of paper on her desk, she turned it face down with a distinct, hard, angry thud as her hand fiercely struck the wood. She did not look at Miss Kline but she had a glimpse of eyes startled and wider than ever.

Miss Kline touched her on the arm. "I—didn't mean to be rude. I didn't think you'd mind. I'm—awfully sorry," she said hurriedly.

"Oh, very well," said Miss Vestry with a curl of her lip. At this moment Mr. Milford opened the door, followed by the advertising man. "There's Mr. Milford now," she said coldly, and went back to her work.

She heard the introductions, Mr. Milford's admiring voice. They had grouped themselves near her and, though she would not look up and pounded hard, taking pleasure in making as much noise as she could, she had glimpses of Mr. Milford's soggy cheeks, painfully

shaven in that effort at spruce youthfulness which she so disliked about him; of the girl's tenacious eyes that, while she smiled at Mr. Milford, now and then cast a baffled glance in her direction. Finally they seated themselves around Mr. Milford's desk, and his shaking hands of an old man, which he tried to keep so firm and gallant, began to fuss with little disquiet motions among his papers. That was always his preliminary to dictation. Miss Vestry heard him say:

"I'll send you to Harry. He's an old friend of mine —great chap. He'll find work for a bright girl like you."

He called, in the tone of special dignity which he kept for her, "Miss Vestry, bring your book, please."

She picked up the notebook, opened it with a swift, professional gesture, and set her face in stony abstraction, as if she were on another planet, with words reaching her through the air from no one and nothing in particular—her special defense against that flow of easy inanities which fell from the lips of people in dictation and which she had to collect like so many choice pearls. The other girl's head was bent, her eyes intent on her lap. "That'll be all, Miss Vestry."

She put the book on her desk and walked by into the dressing room, to get away from them—from the girl's low voice, from the two men who now listened to her with attention and looked at her with a soothed softening of their faces and let their minds be filled for the while with her needs. The girls who came to Mr. Milford Anita Vestry disliked because of the nuisance of taking down and writing the letters of introduction,

and then forgot. But this girl filled her with such an intense nervous dissatisfaction—was it envy?—that she sat and clenched her hands to control the loosened odds and ends of nerves that whirled within her. It was a state of discontent not uncommon with her, but this Miss Kline—not altogether by the inadvertent rudeness—had managed to make her lot seem so poor, so mean, so inferior, that it became a state beyond what she could bear.

CHAPTER TWO

THE *Dress Daily* building stood a few steps from Fifth Avenue. It was a part of Fifth Avenue, however —the section of the clothing workers—which Grace Kline always wished to eliminate from her consciousness as soon as possible. These gloomy structures that shed almost a sour odor, these hurrying foreign feet brought thoughts that were not like the thoughts one had after crossing Madison Square and pausing before Brentano's. There was not in this air the sudden, resilient thoughtlessness, the expectant quiver, that made the heart beat faster, the walk more swift and alert after Thirty-fourth Street. Once, after some discussion about the atmosphere of Paris, it had occurred to her to wonder at the power which the light feet, the insubstantial minds of men and women had to impress themselves far,

far beneath heavy pavements, high, high above in the intangible ether, to shape slabs of stone and sections of air so that, years after, centuries after, other people would thrill like hounds to the sense of old, permeating moods. At some times she caught with a stab of elation the feeling of being one of the persons who, alive today, were adding their slight memories to the store of memory which New York had from the past and would have to draw on in the future. This was such a day. It was cold, but the sky was a boundless blue, the wind raced with a stirring energy, and the air had that liquefied-diamond quality of the New York autumn.

As she waited for a bus, she turned her mind, by an effort of will which was becoming necessary to her in the state of harassment in which she lived, away from the wide-open, limitless blue. It frightened her, one could so easily get lost there. She turned her mind away and into herself and shut it within tightly. It was equivalent to closing the windows in a room. All the draperies that had been flying about, all her ideas, came to rest in smooth order. In the first place, it was two-thirty, so Harry Strauss, to whom she had the letter of introduction, would probably be in. In the second place, did she look well to see him? She opened her purse and consulted its mirror—not surreptitiously, for a beautiful girl need feel no shame to gaze in a glass. Her dark hair, under the black satin hat, perfectly softened the fine, regular curve of her brows. Her eyes, by their purely physical depth and width, possessed an irresistible suction, like the dark waters of deep wells. Her cheeks were long and too thin. They

became hollow under the least strain. But the even, warm hue of her skin, to which the wind never brought color or the sun heat, which lay lightly over her face like a pearly, glowing cloud, concealed the thinness. There was a composed power in her face, in the lips which were softly put together. She was quite aware of the eyes of every man who turned without hope but in spite of himself to glance at her.

By one of those extravagant economies of people who have to make a prosperous appearance on small means, she had been forced to wear a fur coat a little early in the season. This fact bothered her for she was as scrupulous in the choice of her clothes as if they had been irreplaceable parts of her body. But her spring coat was too shabby and childish to go job hunting in and she could not afford a special autumn wrap. The hint of pale orange between the black of the sealskin and the black of the hat pleased her. That, at least, was perfect.

Harry Strauss's office was at Forty-fourth Street and Fifth Avenue. She coveted a job and could not help her heart's beating a little faster. But Grace Kline never felt really nervous about meeting new people, even prospective employers. Her face, she knew, served her as sufficient passport, assured her a certain welcome anywhere. As she watched the streets sidle by, she thought that she had not done badly for one day of job hunting. The acquaintances she had collected with this end in view had been kind to her. She already had one offer in case she found nothing better. If she really got work with Harry Strauss she would earn a good

salary. How much? She ought to think of how much to ask. To keep her mind still shut—away from that boundless contingency which was ever before her like a landscape, luring her to wander in it without plan and only for the warm joy of the moment—she began hastily to design the clothes she would get, her winter's wardrobe, if Harry Strauss really hired her. The shop windows, passing by on both sides of the street, helped her. She scanned them with concentration and they assured her that these things could be sufficient, that these things could fill a mind. They called to her eagerly to trust them and they would tell her what to do and where to buy.

Just before she entered Harry Strauss's office she paused again and touched her lips into a faint orange splendor. Then, her eyes marching ahead of her, her head slightly bent forward, as if with their weight—her usual carriage—she walked into the office. The stenographer thought she was haughty and looked at her with an admiring fear. She had her chair just outside the inner office and she opened the door to it without getting up.

"Mr. Strauss isn't busy. You can go right in."

Fortunately, it was a small office, for Mr. Strauss, who sat at his desk rolling a cigar between his teeth, watched each step she took. He did not rise but waved to her to sit down. Her eyes fixed themselves on his face, in which appeared the vague, almost wistful relaxation that she had come to expect as a due tribute to her appearance.

"Well—er—what's your trouble?" It was kindly,

even courteously said, despite the keen, clever, stabbing gleam in Mr. Strauss's bright eyes. In spite of all she had heard about him, she liked him at sight. He was about forty, dressed in a gray suit. A silver mane of hair, crisp, shining like strong steel wire in the sun, stood back from his forehead. He had an aquiline nose and his decisive voice had a note in it as if it were aquiline too.

"I have—a letter—for you from Mr. Milford," she said softly.

"M—m—m." After he had read the letter, his very bright eyes glanced over it at her, considering her. They halted at her brief skirt and slid over her legs and ankles. She felt them and was amused, gratified, strictly within herself. There was nothing wrong with her legs.

"I've a man working for me now," he said.

She kept quiet.

"I might be able to use a bright girl. Something just came up——"

Her eyes, that had been gazing at the air to the side of him, moved to his face, stayed there. Although she knew all about her eyes, this was never an entirely calculated gesture on her part. As soon as she placed her eyes anywhere, they clung of themselves.

"Just what have you done?" asked Mr. Strauss suddenly. "Milford says you're just out of college, but you've had some experience."

"I—Mr. McTavish of the Brooklyn *Press* is a good friend of mine, and the last two years of college I did movie criticisms for him and theatrical interviews."

"You know McTavish, hmm. Who else do you know? Know any of the theatrical and movie crowd on the New York papers? It's your contacts that count in publicity, you know."

"Yes. I know Hugh Coleman very well—and Tommy Manship——"

"Not Deering? Don't know Deering, do you?" he interrupted.

"No. I don't know him," she said, and her eyes fell with concern. She had no idea who Deering was.

"Have you got any friends on any of the other papers? Know anyone down at the *World?*"

"Well, Mildred Nelson is a very good friend of mine," she said with assurance. She had at least met Mildred Nelson many times.

Mr. Strauss lit his cigar and took up one of the telephones on his desk. "So you know McTavish, huh?" he repeated. He said to his stenographer through the phone, "Get me McTavish of the Brooklyn *Press.*" Then he sat back and watched her. There was that in his face, serious though he kept it, which purred at her discomfort, at her inability to protest against the rudeness of questioning another person about her capacities in her presence. She had nothing to fear from McTavish. Yet she could not help but feel the turmoil of awaiting the signing of her own reprieve or death warrant there, before her eyes, against her ears. And Mr. Strauss knew this. She saw that he enjoyed it, enjoyed her suspense, enjoyed his own shrewdness, the idea of making an unexpected move, stealing a march on her poise.

In a few minutes the bell tinkled. She heard Mr. Strauss say, "Hello, McTavish. Harry Strauss speaking. There's a girl here—Grace Kline—who says she worked for you. What do you know about her?" And he kept his eyes, with that malicious twinkle, on her. But as he listened he took them away and his face grew grave, respectful. He was handing her the palm of victory. He was saying, "I see. That's fine. I'm glad to hear that." And, in fact, he seemed pleased. When he had hung up the receiver he spoke to her with a note of apology, as if he begged pardon for his suspicion that she might be cheating him. But wouldn't he have been even better pleased if the conversation had been unfavorable, if his suspicions had been justified and he had caught her?

"Well," he said, "McTavish thinks very highly of you. He says you're a smart girl, doesn't hesitate to recommend you for any job."

She smiled nervously.

"Now, how much would you work for?"

She lowered her eyes. When she raised them again they were frank and they pleaded.

"I—don't know anything about publicity salaries."

"This job wouldn't pay more than forty to start," said Mr. Strauss, tapping his cigar against the ash tray. He flashed his stabbing glance at her but he could tell nothing by her face, whether it was more than she expected or less. Then he remembered that she was just out of college and felt annoyed that he had not made it lower. "I could get plenty of people to work for less," he added. Her expression grew remote, cool. "But we

won't quarrel over a couple of dollars," he said with a wave of his hand. "There's a good opening here, and you look like the kind of a girl I want. If you make good, it may run to as much as seventy-five—a hundred—after awhile. Depends on you. Well, is that fair?"

"I think so. Yes." She seemed quite composed.

"All right, then, come in to-morrow around nine. Now, you've probably heard that press agents don't begin work till noon. Forget all that. This office opens at nine like any other, and I expect you on time." He was leaning over the desk, his eyes alert and intent, and after each remark he jerked his chin down for emphasis. "Don't be nervous. You do your work and I'll be fair to you. Ask anyone you like. They'll tell you that Harry Strauss is fair." His eyes seemed to argue with her to believe. "The man I have is out now. You come in here to-morrow, and you'll meet him. You'll work together. He'll show you around till you catch on." He dismissed her.

Just as she was opening the door he called sharply, "Miss Kline!" She turned and found him facing her, his eyes still more alert.

"Don't tell anyone you're working for me."

He swung away from her, back to his desk, and became very busy.

CHAPTER THREE

LEARNING from the elevator starter that it was half-past three, Grace faced Fifth Avenue again with a sort of sigh, not of sadness, but of anticipation that was almost too stifling. This—this was the part of the day when she ungirded her mind, set it free, let it wander among the dark woods and bright flowers of her bitter happiness. This—this was the part of the day for which she was so tautened, so wound up that she could hardly wait for the moment of relaxation. All the elements of her day, all the little notes, arranged themselves as accompaniment, as an undercurrent, to this hour from four to five, and she strained toward it as one's ears strain expectantly toward the melodious, recurrent theme of a symphony.

She hurried across town to Broadway. The sunshine

glimmered and trembled in an ecstasy of autumn fulfillment. Finding no autumn leaves, each separate ray of sunshine yet put itself to use, twinkling and rippling on the sides of buildings as if to stir each separate mote of the shades of ancient foliage. She felt as if the sun placed a carpet of the cropped fall grass beneath her feet, as if she proceeded, not between lines of stone, but between rows of ordered, wine-red trees, bending to the wind.

These city blocks were becoming specially near to her. Even as her life was rooting itself in them, so they were being buried in her to form part of the soil of nourishing memory. Already she could meet shades of herself going and returning along these streets, going at four o'clock, returning at five. There were shop windows into which she had stared, not knowing what they showed, so as to hide her tears from passers-by, cryptic brownstone houses at which she had turned and glanced so as to conceal an idiotic happiness from the prying eyes of other people. They were like no other shop windows and no other houses on earth, and these streets seemed specially stained for her; they smelled differently, they had a tingling odor.

Before the jazz band of Broadway, with all its tin-pan clamor and hoots, the irregular lines of buildings and billboards forming a perfect continuation of the discord, she marked time impatiently. She had to wait for the traffic to cross to the Astor, and she couldn't wait and, like a true New Yorker, made up her mind at the most inopportune moment and began to dodge between. She didn't hurry. Her feet made the perfect

feints and maneuvers for her while she looked at the motor cars aggressively and put up her hand now and then to warn them to beware.

The ladies' room of the Astor was almost like a club-room. Grace often saw the same faces here at the same hour, absorbed like her in the same purpose, pushing their way between other girls at the mirrors, unaware of them almost entirely, as they glued their eyes to their own faces and made them, with a sober, a sacred concentration, clear and fresh and individual for someone, some one person to meet.

A nun before the altar could not have told her beads with more piety than Grace Kline attended to her face. Although it needed little help, there were numerous delicate motions necessary almost to magnetize it into perfection. Her hair had to be done over with the exact slender part at the side, the smooth silken widening over the ears, and a tiny half-bang lying gently under that portion which was brought somewhat over her forehead. When she was ready to draw on her gloves, she bestowed a customary sigh on her hands (they were awkwardly jointed—"washerwoman's hands", she called them), then turned from all angles before the glass.

She would be just in time. Already the first strain of the melody, the note of yearning in loneliness, began to sing in her. It had been a good day, but by herself, the goodness, though she knew it was there, had no words or point. When she had shared it with someone, given it to someone to taste, when she had been able to see by someone else's eyes that it was good, then

she would realize its excellence. And now was the time when the note of yearning would draw its answering harmony.

At Forty-eighth Street and Seventh Avenue, as she crossed, she saw Blake already turning down the block. The line of his shoulders was obstinate, each step unhurried. She walked behind him, smiling, waiting for the moment when she would take a few extra steps and place herself by his side. He would never turn and see her, he never by any chance made extra movements. He was an only child, used to being surrounded by other people's care and thought, and this was apparent even in his gait, that took no account of any other pedestrian, never swerved, as if he were sure the others would notice his direction and clear a path for him. Grace walked just behind his shoulder, almost touching him, and still, as she expected, he was unconscious of her. Her smile grew amused, lenient. She stretched out her hand and put it on his shoulder.

At the same time he stopped and said, "Hello." It was not spoken to her but to a man in a fur-collared coat whom she had not seen approaching. Simultaneously, he glanced at Grace. His face flushed an awkward beet-red, paled. He looked straight at the man, talking to him, seeming as if he did not feel the hand on his shoulder, did not know the girl who so obviously knew him. The man, after the first curious glint in his eyes, pretended not to notice.

For a few seconds Grace stood in confusion on the outskirts of the little circle of intimacy the two made. The pang which these little intimate groupings, in

which she had no place, in which she might never have a place, sent through her! The whole world, all its rules and customs, were bent on pushing her outside of them, keeping her there in the cold, while the two men spoke of mutual relatives, drew the warm fibers of their mutual background about them to form a rope beyond which she stood alone, without anything to tie her to the group. Her face was white—but not with anger, for she well knew the ever-present reason which might explain—as she walked around them, into the tearoom, and waited by the door. Sometimes there were people in the place whom she knew—it was frequented by what Mr. Strauss called the theatrical and movie crowd—and whose light, understanding, inquiring consideration she had to bear. The eyes of the woman at the desk admired her. She called, "Hello, Miss Kline." And Grace answered with a certain pity, a certain pride, even in her present state. Dull women like that had nothing better to do than to approve of her and ask for her attention.

When Blake came in she saw that he would volunteer no excuse. He was as pale as she, ashamed, distant. The note of answering harmony was not there to-day. They were both alone, she outside, he within something. In silence, they sat down at a table in the farthest corner; in silence looked at the china plates and bric-a-brac loading down shelves below the ceiling, at the prints of English hunting scenes and framed old theater programs which covered the walls. They always had tea and toast, the cheapest things on the menu, and their waitress was bringing it without question.

Grace said, feeling along each possible path of approach, "I ought to celebrate. I've got a job—with Harry Strauss."

He answered with little interest. "Harry Strauss. You'll learn a lot of tricks from him. That's good."

So the chief episode of the day, which she had waited for him to taste of, to show her its excellence, was not good after all. What difference did it make to get a job, to do her hair over, to be glanced at on the street? She tried again.

"He told me not to tell anyone I was working for him. Why, do you suppose?"

This time he smiled. "He's pulled a good many raw press stunts. The papers are supposed to be down on him. I hear he works through a man named Al Epstein."

"I'm to meet him to-morrow."

"You start to-morrow?" And now his face was smoothing out of its tight, preoccupied lines. He began to tell her of Harry Strauss's exploits. He had a memory for all kinds of information, liked to sort it in his mind, which was very orderly, and produce it with a faint touch of irony. The anecdotes which he picked up along Broadway lent themselves especially to this irony. They laughed over a story of how Harry Strauss had managed to find his way at night to the electric advertisement of a movie which he was press-agenting and had arranged the letters to form a word that stopped traffic. He had hidden the key which unlocked the entrance office to the sign, so that it was a long time be-

fore the letters could be corrected, the crowds below dispersed. The papers had been forced to print accounts of the traffic block and to mention his picture as the cause.

When they had done laughing he was ready to regard her fully for the first time that day.

"You're so lovely to-day, Grace," he said, with his own note of yearning and looked down at his teacup.

"As ever?" she said.

He nodded emphatically and flushed the violent, almost tearful flush of sandy-haired people. It was the signal for the recurrent harmony between them. Now they were close again, now all other fibers had been cut for awhile and only their own fibers remained, growing together. Now they could say anything to each other, what he had been meaning and hating to tell her.

"That was my uncle." He jerked the words out.

Her eyes grew harassed. "Did he—say something? Will he——"

"No, he wouldn't say anything. I—only—well—I didn't——"

"I know." She did know. She had forced herself to understand as quickly as possible that men—that Blake anyhow—were hideously awkward in personal relationships. It saved much pain. Blake might have introduced her as some acquaintance who had come up to him on the street. There was no law against his knowing girls, no law against some girl, in casual amusement, putting her hand on his shoulder. He might have spared

her that horrible moment. But, of course, that would never occur to him.

There was another silence. It was, however, a silence which they shared. They were both thinking the same thoughts.

"How are things—at home?" she said softly.

"Same. She's going away next month." He never called his wife by name, and he didn't dare to say "my wife." Grace could say "your wife" sometimes with a bitter emphasis, but it was forbidden to him.

"Home?"

"No. On a visit."

They exchanged a long look.

"Haven't quarreled, by any chance?" inquired Grace, raising her eyebrows in pointed archness.

"We never quarrel," he said with a smile. This was their little joke.

"Have you been working?"

"Bill and I finished one act."

"Oh. That's fine."

She was questioning him with her eyes. He knew what that question meant. Was there any chance—was there—would there—be money? There were hopes connected with the making of money, which smooths over many things, which is a good panacea to apply to other people's heartaches. He turned his teacup round and round in the saucer. Tea slopped over.

"Well," said Grace, "that's fine about your act. You'll finish the play soon, won't you? And, by the way, if I start work to-morrow, I can't tell where I'll be at four. I may be late. Can I call you anywhere?"

"You might call me at Fred's office. I could drop in there around four, and if we miss connections you might leave word."

"I hate to call there. They're not very nice to me." Her eyes pleaded with him. But he looked down and she saw his face hardening into its so familiar sullen lines. Why should she fuss about such a little thing? After all, he remembered that he had a good deal to bear himself. She stretched her arm hastily across and touched his hand, lying by the plate. He returned a hard pressure. Their hands lay one within the other on the table. "All right. Then I'll call you at Fred's around four. And do I see you Saturday?"

"You do," he said.

They got up. Before they rose, she slipped her share of the check into his palm. He flushed again. He hated this. But at the very beginning of their afternoon teas she had insisted and made a habit of it. He couldn't afford to take her to tea every day. He was very poor. Very well, so was she. They would be poor together. The dull woman at the desk nodded and looked after them. Together they walked out, holding their heads somewhat belligerently, in case any acquaintance should see them and think they had no business to be together, and twining their arms one within the other.

They walked slowly down to Sixth Avenue. The final chord with all its fused, attuned, contrasting notes, its gathering of all into one, was sounding in different ways for each of them. They wished it to go on and on. When the final chord dies, the symphony is over, people clatter their seats, the hall grows bare, and ghosts of dead

music wail without noise and cling in the air and will not leave go. At the corner he put his arms about her and they kissed each other for a moment. Blake hated embraces on street corners, but there was no other place for them to kiss.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE sunshine was gone. Lights were being turned on in office buildings. The crowds were beginning to rush home. Before dinner time in late fall—a windy, hurrying, desolate interval on city streets when everyone's thoughts fly to an enclosure, some enclosure. Grace continued to walk aimlessly along Sixth Avenue. After she left Blake it was always hard for her to button her mind anew against the cold, lone air. When people leave a warm room the bleak outer air can penetrate them subtly and thoroughly in a moment until they find themselves colder than they ever were before, they find themselves freezing. At such times Grace had some certain recourses, minute hinges which she used to swing her mood from the unbearable, the unknowable, to the composed routine of every day. Looking in shop windows was such a hinge, buying a new pair of stockings, a

new handkerchief, dropping into a movie, ordering a soda. But the best hinge was a visit with Letty, even a telephone call to her.

Letty and Grace had grown up together and for many years their families had lived close by in lower Washington Heights, Grace on St. Nicholas Avenue, Letty in a poorer house just around the corner. Letty had been a stenographer while Grace had gone to college, but this had not disturbed their friendship. There was something so fresh and gay, so frank, about Letty, with her round little face, her round little suits, and her fresh, greedy little mouth. She had married soon and well, moving from the house around the corner and leaving Grace in the apartment on St. Nicholas Avenue. An Irish-American, she had married a man of Grace's racial background, German-Jewish-American, and was adapting herself, not too entirely and with many pert remarks, to his accustomed home-and-family existence. They lived on Riverside Drive in the Eighties. Often Grace stopped by on her way home.

As soon as she heard Letty's lively "Hello," Grace felt a sense of relief. There, very close, were people who cared about her, who were concerned with her doings, small sheds to huddle into for warmth. No need to say who it was. The two girls knew all the inflections of each other's voices.

"What are you doing? I thought I'd come in for a minute," said Grace.

"Oh-h——" Letty's voice dropped. "Harry and I thought we'd eat out and go to the theater. Why? Anything happened?"

"Oh, no. Nothing special. I got a job." Grace smiled. Even if something had happened, it would be hard to drag Letty away from an evening out and at the theater. It was proof of her friendship for Grace that, once in a while, she had given up a promise of gayety for her sake—but even so, with a pout, unwillingly.

"That's grand. Oh, Grace, that's wonderful! Where? How? Did you tell Blake?" Letty's voice was twice as happy, happy for Grace and happy that she could go on to her party.

Grace giggled. "What're you going to see that you're so excited about?"

"Oh, just the *Follies*. You know Harold, the Tired Business Man. He's under a bed right now—looking for a collar button. I don't have to look. I'm speaking over the phone. Ha-ha! Gosh, he *found* it! But tell me about the job, Grace. Where——"

Grace explained.

"Gee, I'm glad. I'm awf'ly glad! What're you doing to-night?"

"Nothing, I guess."

Letty's voice became lower, sympathizing. "Want to stay over here to-night?" Another voice made itself heard but not clear enough for the words to get through. "That's only Harold," said Letty impatiently. "He thinks we'll be home too late. Don't mind him."

"I don't," replied Grace, laughing. Letty laughed too. "But I suppose I might as well go home and tell Ma-a-a. And, listen, I can't have lunch with you to-morrow. I don't know where I'll be."

"Oh, that's all right. Only call me, will you? And

come up to-morrow night, if you can manage, and tell me all about it."

"I'll call you anyway."

"I'm awf'ly glad! And don't forget to call me. Good-bye, Gracie."

"Good-bye, Let. Have a good time."

Grace went out of the booth, feeling cheerful again. After all, it had been a successful day. Letty had looked at it and found it successful. She hated to spoil her mood by crowding into the Elevated or the Subway. Time enough for that when she got home to Ma. All the busses would be full now. She searched in her purse. If she walked on a little farther, along the park, she would have just enough to pay for keeping her mood intact, safe from being brushed away by the clumsy hands of the home-going crowds, in a cab to One Hundred Thirty-seventh Street. Anyhow, she made up her mind rebelliously, she ought to celebrate to-day in spite of what Ma would say. Their parlor windows faced the street and Mrs. Kline never seemed to miss the stoppage of a taxi before the door if that taxi contained Grace.

The click of Grace's key brought Ma trampling down the long hall of the apartment. Mrs. Kline's feet always sounded, at least to Grace's ears, as if they trampled. *Clamp, clamp, clack.*

She couldn't help looking Grace over with pride and couldn't help saying suspiciously, "Came up in a taxi, didn'cha?"

"It's all right, Ma," said Grace, going past her. "I got a job."

Mrs. Kline followed into Grace's room. She followed

everywhere physically. She was always looking for some loophole through which to squeeze herself to follow into Grace's mind, into Grace's heart, into Grace's soul, trying to trample down barrier after barrier as it was inevitably erected against her. A conversation between Grace and her mother was like an encounter between a peaceable, besieged city and its attackers. At first Grace withdrew, like the city, far within walls and lay low, resigned, merely attempting to ward off invasion. Then, suddenly, there would come one sally too much. In desperation, she, like the city, would turn and rise and strike.

Mrs. Kline could not help it. She would do anything for Grace, give anything to Grace. Mr. Kline had been divorced when Grace was a child and, to supplement small and irregular alimony, Mrs. Kline had become dressmaker to her friends so as to send Grace through college and keep up appearances. She still made dresses. But Grace wasn't grateful, could not be forced to show gratitude. In truth Grace felt that she had done her share. As a child, she had delivered gowns to the mothers of playmates, had cleaned and cooked after school. During the last years of college she had been able to add to the family income, and now there devolved on her most of the burden of supporting her mother. What more did Ma want? Why couldn't she let her, Grace, alone?

Mother and daughter resembled each other in the contours of their faces and in a certain insistence which both had. Grace clung with her eyes. Mrs. Kline clung with her strident voice, with her hands, by constant

assertion. Otherwise, her eyes were china blue and she had a lot of coarsening, once-golden hair.

"So you got a job. That's good. It's time. How much money are they giving you? What kind of work? The same kind you did on the paper?"

"Forty to start."

"That's pretty good for a beginner," cried Mrs. Kline, brightening. "I must tell Mrs. Mendelsohn. Betty Mendelsohn's been working a month but she only makes twenty-five. You'd think she was the Queen of Sheba the way Mrs. Mendelsohn acts. I told her if *he* hadn't wanted you to make that trip with him you'd have got a job the minute you graduated too——"

"Oh, all right, Ma. I'm hungry." Grace had taken off her hat and now, with a sigh, she shook out of her coat.

Mrs. Kline felt it, as usual, between thumb and forefinger. "Well, it was cold enough for sealskin to-day, in spite of all the fuss you made. Let me tell you a lot of girls would be glad to have a sealskin coat, too early or not. The coat's a good buy, too. It's like I told you. You gotta get money off him while he's got it." "He" referred to Mr. Kline.

Without answering, Grace walked up the hall into the dining room. She wore a long pale-orange blouse with loose sleeves and a black skirt. She seemed taller and slimmer than she actually was, and her back was a little rounded, but unnoticeably. Behind her trampled Mrs. Kline, following. She sat down at the table. It was a middle-class dining room, with every part of a dining-room "set" righteously in place and with Mrs.

Kline's wedding present cutglass shining icily through the door of the china closet. It was chilly there. Grace shivered.

"You ought to put something around you," said Mrs. Kline. "Go get yourself a sweater. First thing you know, you'll catch pneumonia and you'll be laid up. When do you start work, anyhow?"

"To-morrow."

"So soon? What've you got to wear? I don't know a thing you got. I'll have to get busy. I'm busy enough as it is. I got a dress for Mrs. Michaels and another ordered to-day——"

"Ma, please bring in the soup."

"—and I got bridge with the Ladies' Circle to-morrow. And what do you think? All of a sudden that Mrs. Levine—Levin they call themselves now—takes notice of me in Temple, and she asks me to come to tea. Charlie Bintner wants me to have lunch with him, too, this week. I don't know if that's proper. Of course, I got my divorce and all, but still . . . You know Charlie Bintner—I told you he was always after me. I'll never forget his face when I told him I was going to get married. But he had only himself to blame. You can't go around with a girl and go around with her and never make your intentions known and expect her to wait for you——"

Grace swore under her breath.

Then Mrs. Kline brought in the soup. She was a poor cook and praised her own cooking. She began to suck in great spoonfuls. Meal times, when her mother sat opposite and talked in her harsh voice and ate soup or

devoured with gusto oranges out of their rinds, were most dreaded by Grace. Then she was most at the point of exploding. She sat tautened over the soup which she had tasted and would not eat.

"Why don't you eat? What's the matter with you?" said Mrs. Kline sharply.

"Nothing. What's the meat?"

"I got some lamb chops. That's what you like, isn't it? There's no suiting you ever. Or is something wrong with you?"

No answer from Grace. Mrs. Kline dragged out the soup and trampled in with plates of chops and weak vegetables which she slammed on the table. She went back for the coffee. Grace picked at her food and drank black coffee.

"What's wrong with you?" insisted Mrs. Kline. "You haven't been eating hardly anything for I don't know how long. What's wrong, I want to know?"

Grace merely gritted her teeth.

There fell a silence, a bad omen.

When Mrs. Kline spoke again her voice was low and accusing.

"Mara Goldenberg told me she saw you having tea with that same man the other day."

Grace dug her fork into the chop.

"Now listen, Grace, God knows I don't want to be like some mothers, prying and snooping. But I'm your mother and I have a right to know who you go around with. Your other friends call on you here. Why can't this man come? What's wrong with him that Mara Goldenberg sees you having tea with him all the time

and your own mother don't know who he is? He looks Gentile, Mara says, and you hold hands with him on the table—right in front of everybody. Well, all right, so he's Gentile. Myself, I'm proud to be Jewish, but I'm not a person that has prejudices. My own brother's married to a Gentile woman as nice as you could find anywhere, and there's Letty Moses, a Catholic, too, married to a man whose own mother goes to Temple with me, and nobody thinks the worse of the Moseses. Do I care who you go around with, so long as they're decent people? But I want to know who this man is that Mara Goldenberg sees you with."

"Mara Goldenberg ought to mind her own business. So should all your friends, for that matter," muttered Grace.

"What's that you said? Mara Goldenberg is a good friend to me and what she tells me I got a right to know —you should tell me yourself. I got a right to *know*. Don't you forget that, young lady! I want to *know* who this man is."

The besieged city turned suddenly.

"Well, you *won't* know," shouted Grace. "It's nothing and it's no one's business and it's none of Mara Goldenberg's business."

She fled down the long corridor to her room, hearing her mother's voice as it followed her. She closed the door with infinite caution. If her mother heard a door shut she would bear down on her privacy on the instant. But it was no use. Mrs. Kline's feet trampled down the hall, her hands rapped on the door. Grace

placed herself against it on the inside, held it to. There was no key.

"Let me in, Grace. Don't you dare to shut the door on me," cried her mother.

"I won't let you in. I'm undressing. Let me *alone!*"

With all her force Grace held the door to. Mrs. Kline rattled the knob. Then she was still. Finally, Grace heard her feet making their raucous journey back up the hall. For a long time she kept her place by the door, taut, putting her hand to her heart unconsciously to try to ease its racking beat.

The room was dark. When she sat down before her dresser she saw her eyes in the glass—so huge—the whites distended and gleaming. She sat there, watching herself, motionless, while the beat of her heart swung back and forth like a pendulum. Now it waned, now it rose mercilessly, filling her till she thought she would be torn apart. It wouldn't stop. It would never stop. She muttered to herself, to her heart, to her mother, to the whole world—over and over: "Let me alone. Oh, let me alone! Why *can't* you let me alone?"

CHAPTER FIVE

It was not long before Grace learned to disregard time in all connections with Broadway, but this first morning she took Harry Strauss's warnings to heart and saw with astonishment that, in spite of them, the office was closed. It stayed closed till nine-thirty. Then the stenographer sauntered in. Grace was still afraid to leave even for a moment to get herself a cup of coffee (she had avoided breakfast with her mother), but she used the chance to throw a little light on her job through the stenographer. She knew that Mr. Strauss publicized an occasional movie for one of the big motion-picture companies, and an occasional show; that he had, usually, theatrical clients. What sort of accounts was Mr. Strauss handling now? The stenog-

rapher thought that the office would be busy with the young widow of a famous dancer who was about to "stage a comeback" in a night club. Grace also wished to find out whether any girl had had her job previously. Miss MacAlister, who showed that she admired Grace's face and clothes, said that only Mr. Epstein had worked for Mr. Strauss, so far as she knew. This encouraged Grace; there would be no standard of comparison to live up to.

Mr. Strauss made his appearance at ten o'clock and did not seem to be in the least impressed to find her waiting. What a fascinating crop of silver hair he had! She felt at home with him. She knew he liked her looks and she liked his. He said without prelude, "Now Annabella Arden is to be at Ontalvo's at ten-thirty to take new pictures. Go over there and wait for her, and when you're through, both of you come back here. Know where Ontalvo's is, my dear?" He took it for granted that she knew who Annabella Arden was.

This time she understood that she had not to hurry. She enjoyed the luxury of breakfast alone in a restaurant. She called up Letty to bolster her courage, and even so, when she got to Ontalvo's, Annabella Arden was absent. Learning that she came from Mr. Strauss's office, the girl at the desk made herself extraordinarily pleasant. The photographer left the studio for a moment to shake her hand. Grace realized that it would be good policy to put herself on cordial terms with these people from the start. She liked them too. It was all being very nice.

She waited an hour. Still no Annabella Arden. She

chanced a telephone call to Mr. Strauss's stenographer to learn where Miss Arden lived.

A sweet, blonde voice, infinitely naïve, spoke to her over the wire. "Oh, honey, I'm *so* sorry you had to wait. But I *told* Harry I didn't want any more pictures. I have loads and loads, dear." The voice grew a whit sharper. "Harry didn't tell me how much the pictures would cost, dear. Can you find out?"

The girl at the desk evaded. "We make special prices for Mr. Strauss." And Grace understood that Mr. Strauss got his percentage from them. She was amused. He certainly didn't miss a thing!

"I believe—Mr. Strauss arranges that," she said carefully through the phone. "I wouldn't know about that."

"Oh, then I think I'll talk to Harry first. Don't you think that would be wise, dear?"

"Then will you be at the office soon?" said Grace.

"I'm leaving this *very* minute, honey."

Grace hurried back, worrying. Did Mr. Strauss expect her to insist on new pictures? Was that part of her job? Mr. Strauss's door was shut and a new air hung over the office, a business air, at once abstracted and intent. The stenographer was typing with such speed that she did not even pause to look up at Grace.

"Mr. Epstein's in with him now," she said over her shoulder.

Feeling very much out of it, Grace took a chair and waited again.

Mr. Strauss's office opened simultaneously with the appearance of Annabella Arden. She carried out the promise of her voice. She was a blonde with round eyes,

a sharp, pretty little face, the flat, charming torso and long legs of a dancer. About her neck she had flung a scarf made up of innumerable tails of animals.

"Come in, both of you," called Mr. Strauss. By his desk sat a short, sloppy young man, chewing gum with wide motions of his lips, round and round. Mr. Epstein. Harry Strauss made the introductions suavely and Grace noticed, as he questioned her and she answered, how well in hand he had Annabella. He treated her like an employee, not a client.

"Now, let's get down to business. Where's Russell?" Russell was Miss Arden's new dancing partner.

"Why, Russell didn't think he could afford you, Harry," said Miss Arden with great pathos.

Mr. Strauss sneered.

"All right. Now, Al, you and Miss Kline get together and plan your campaign. Break the story Monday. We must get a lot of space before the opening. Now, you can have five tables Thursday night for the newspapers. Now, Al," he said sharply, "you and Miss Kline work together but don't get in each other's way. You let her take the *Times*. She knows the people there."

"Does she know Deering?" said Al quickly.

"No, but she knows Tommy Manship and all that gang."

Al glanced at Grace but kept quiet and chewed his gum. He took a sheet of paper and wrote "*Times*" in pencil. He added slowly a "K."

"Al, you take the *American* and the *Journal*. Let Miss Kline have the *World*, too. She's a friend of Mildred Nelson. Divide the other papers between you."

"Yeh," said Al. He chewed gum omnisciently. Nothing was beyond him.

"Now, what have you got planned?" demanded Mr. Strauss. Grace made a nervous contraction of her throat. Al said to her at once, as if taking a cue, "Now, we gotta get pictures taken right away. Go out and plant 'em in the roto sections for next Sunday."

"*This* Sunday. What about this Sunday?" rapped out Mr. Strauss.

And Miss Arden piped up, "Oh, but I think I ought to have my picture in this Sunday."

A slight look passed between Al and Harry.

Al said, "All right. I might be able to make the *Times* this Sunday."

Grace knew he couldn't. It was Thursday and the *Times* weekly picture section was sure to be already made up. She thought she might as well help in the propitiation of Annabella. "I know—Hector Valley," she said. "I'll go right over and see him."

Al interposed, "I know him very well, too. Very good friendamine, Heck Valley. I was out on a drunk with him till two in the morning yesterday."

He went back to his gum and his paper. "Now we'll give a tea for her," he added. "Ask all the newspapermen. I got a great stunt for her."

"All right." Mr. Strauss raised a finger. "Now—you—Al," he said with emphasis, "don't get in Miss Kline's way. Miss Kline, you stick to your papers." He turned to Miss Arden. "Now, Annabella, one thing more. These people are working for you, Mr. Epstein and Miss Kline. Now, I want you above all never to break any

appointments they make for you with newspaper people. Make the appointments at your convenience; their time is yours. But once you've made an appointment, don't break it, or you'll get them in wrong with the papers. They'll work for you faithfully if you keep up your end. But if you get them in wrong with the papers, they'll lose interest and you'll lost publicity. Isn't that so?"

Grace and Al said together, "Yes, that's so."

Al turned to Miss Arden. "Where you gonna be this afternoon? I'm gonna have some pictures made."

"Oh, and Miss Arden said something about the dresses she used to wear with Gene Arden," interrupted Grace. "I thought—there would be a good feature story in her giving a few away to girls who need new evening dresses and can't afford them." She went on nervously. "I mean —the idea would be that they held too many memories now that Mr. Arden was—dead."

"But I gave them away already, honey. I sold them," said Annabella hastily.

"Well, you don't really have to give them away. We —can manage that."

Mr. Strauss nodded at Grace as if to say, "You're learning." He handed her a folder full of pictures.

As Al rose, Grace rose too and followed him into the outer office. At once Al took the folder of pictures away from her. There wasn't a consecutive thought in her mind, nothing but a jumble of feverish beginnings. By an effort of will she kept her voice, at least, from trembling. They sat down on chairs near the door, and Al began to scrawl on his piece of paper.

"We better figure out who we're gonna ask to the tea. And the opening, too. I thought of an old stunt," said Al. "Old, but it always works. I'm gonna have her legs insured."

Grace began: "How about——" and he snatched the words from her lips: "How about a new dance step?" Feverishly, "New dance step" was written on the sheet of paper.

Al bit his pencil and said thoughtfully, "I don't know what we'll do about a typewriter for you. I use Miss MacAlister's. I wanted Harry to get one for you this morning, but he won't. I never liked to work with a night club," he added, sighing. "It's hard to get stuff in—and then the late hours. I had the Gaga Club when it opened and I gave it to Benny Best. You know Benny Best, nice fella? Now we gotta figure out all the people we're gonna ask to the opening."

The door opened for Annabella.

"Say, where you gonna be practising this afternoon?" called Al.

Annabella gave them the address. "I'll be there till four o'clock, honey. We're going over the routine." Her eyes lingered on Grace. It was part of Grace's luck that women were attracted by her looks as well as men. They wondered at her skin and at the suction of her eyes; couldn't keep their glances away, wishing to find the secret. Annabella bestowed a special smile on Grace.

"She likes you," said Al suspiciously. "Know her before?"

"No."

Al looked at his watch. It was nearly two. "Well,

let's go out and grab some lunch. Let's see now, I gotta call the photographer and I gotta go to the bank. And, say, I gotta get ahold of an insurance man I know who'll stand for the fake policy. I'm gonna insure her legs for half a million. Come on."

So many small errands which Al had to do developed on the way that it was three o'clock before they finally sat down at a lunch counter and swallowed a sandwich and a cup of coffee apiece. Two nervous spots burned on Grace's cheeks, under her skin.

"Now listen," said Al. "You run over to the *Times* and see if you can plant a picture. I'll go on to the studio. Show up there at four, will ya? Listen, are those pictures backed? Harry said she opens Thursday, didn't he? What's her name, Annabelle or Annabella?"

Al insisted on "backing" all the pictures himself—that is, writing a description on the back. She let him take the lead. With many frowns and chewings of his pencil he composed at last a paragraph ornate enough to suit him.

"We don't have to bother with her partner—that's one good thing," said Al. "Harry isn't working for him. It's no cinch getting space for a girl dancer in a night club, but a man—Jesus Christ!"

Whatever he said Grace listened to intently and absorbed.

She hurried over to the *Times*. The head of the rotogravure section was, as she expected, in the composing room. She left a picture without much hope, then went into the Dramatic Department to see Tommy Manship. When she had had her job on the Brooklyn *Press*, she

had been very careful to meet and make friends with as many people on the New York papers as possible. She had gotten the press agents of the shows whose openings she sometimes covered to point out and introduce her to dramatic editors and critics. Sometimes she had been invited by the press agents to parties where these might be present. Her foresight was now rewarded. Tommy Manship, the assistant dramatic editor, knew and liked her. He placed a chair by his desk for her, heard her story, and puckered his lips.

"I'd help you if I could, Grace," he said. "But you know how much space we have for dramatic notes week days. We haven't got enough for the regular shows, let alone night clubs. I might try to slip in something next Sunday. Send me a note and I'll see."

Watching her big disappointed eyes, he added, "They're running a dance column now on Sundays. I'll find out who does it and you get in touch with him. Maybe he'll do something for you."

He telephoned about and wrote down a name and number for her. It was nice to have her sitting there, such a pretty girl. Not pretty exactly. Both less and more than pretty. He had been a press agent himself and he told her when various people on the papers were apt to be in and advised her how to proceed.

In return she took him into her confidence, with grave eyes fixed on him.

"I'm—really working for Harry Strauss. But I'm supposed to be working by myself because Mr. Strauss isn't so well liked by the papers."

He nodded and grinned.

"I'll see you around now, Grace, won't I?"

"Very—pos-sibly." She always halted in this way between words and sometimes syllables. People thought it an affectation, but really there was a catch in her throat that made it necessary.

She went down into the street, soothed by admiration, not feeling so much of a petitioner. Walking past a window with a clock, she realized suddenly that it was four. For the first time in a year she had forgotten to anticipate this hour. For the first time in a year, an affair of her own—this job—had to take precedence of Blake's affairs. Always, heretofore, she had attuned herself to his wishes, arranged her day to suit the convenience of the hour between four and five for him. It did not occur to her even to question the fact that her job must come first now. She did not dare not to appear at the studio. And, although she ached to see Blake, she felt with a start that she was smiling a little, not hurrying to the telephone. The air seemed to widen a bit in front of her; she had a returning taste of freedom, the old freedom she had known and lost. It was the merest taste and gone on the instant. But it was pleasant.

She was even more pleased to find Blake waiting for her call in Fred's office, to hear the disappointed droop of his voice. And he couldn't blame her. It did not occur to him either to question the inevitable precedence of a job.

"Then I won't see you to-day?" he repeated, as if he must have time to let this sink in, down into the slow depths of his mind. "I won't see you to-day. . . . What're you doing to-night?" he asked suddenly.

"I thought I might go to Let's for dinner."

"Well, I—I'll try to get away. Don't count on it. But I'll try to get up there."

She was smiling so widely that a man followed her out of the cigar store. He soon saw the smile was not for him. For the first time in twelve months Blake had, of his own free will and not by her exaction, planned to make room in his life, in his wife's life, to permit her to get in. All these months it had been her sole efforts, almost, which had nourished the hope between them. Now the hope sprang up greener, stronger. Blake was helping to cherish it of his own accord.

She took a street car to the dance studio. Small duties, moods, comments, questions beat on her exhausted mind as soon as she entered. Annabella, in a skimpy chiffon practise dress, was posing with bad temper. She had expected a string of cameras. There was only one—hired, though Annabella didn't know this. The partner, a keen, slick-haired youth, tried to insinuate himself into all the pictures.

"Aw, there you are," cried Al. "Look, Annabella don't understand that this man's from the I. N. S. that supplies pictures to all the papers. That's better than getting all the papers up here, Annabella. This man sees that they all get prints and they have to use 'em, don't they? They pay for 'em, don't they, Grace?"

Grace added her fervent assurances. "We must get pictures of her legs," she said. "Hasn't she stunning legs, Al?"

"That's just what I was going to do," said Al.

And, "Your own legs aren't so bad, honey," said Annabella with a gratified smile.

Between them, they got her on a table and pulled her practise dress even farther up. They shoved the partner away. They sat her on another table before the insurance man, pretending to sign a policy for her legs. They posed her with the partner in a presumably new dance step—Annabella, however, well to the fore. The photographer called, "Ready." There were flashes. The long bare room was filled with smoke. The studio instructor gave a lesson in one corner and growled at them, about the smoke, about the time they took. A piano tinkled.

"Now, one—two—three—— Say, you people have *got* to get out. Your time's up."

"Now, what'll we call this dance?" cried Al. "We got to get a name for it. What do you say, Grace?"

"The New Yorker, maybe," suggested Grace after a weary pause.

"Naw, that's too high-tone, too highbrow. Something snappy. Gee, I don't know about dancing."

"How about the Ritz?" said Annabella's partner.

"The Ritzy Ritz! That's what we'll call it! *That's* swell. Say, when I get a hunch, Grace——"

"Now listen, when'll these pictures be ready? Now listen, Grace, you go down to his office and call for them to-morrow early. Nine o'clock. See? Good-bye, Annabella. The pictures'll be knockouts. I bet we make the front page. Now, I'll get in touch with you to-morrow morning. Good-bye, Annabella. I'll see you get your break, Karston. Say, you'll be the best-known insurance

man in America to-morrow. See, Grace, you remember Karston. He insures all the actors and actresses, don't you, Karston? So long. Yeh, we won't forget to use your name."

Al was everywhere.

"Now listen, Grace, we got time to go down to the office and pound out some stories—just a short one, see?—so we'll have 'em on hand in the morning when we start making the rounds. I gotta go down to the *American* now myself. Gee, I got that show to see about yet."

It was nearly six. Grace protested.

"Oh, we don't have to do the stories to-night. We have loads of time. I'll do them first thing—in the morning. Aren't you—tired?"

"Tired! Say, you ain't seen nothing yet. Wait till we start trotting around to the papers. You gotta hop, I tell you, when you work for Harry. But I'll get everything fixed up. Leave it to Friend Al."

He squeezed her arm. He seemed much jollier and not so suspicious, so she assumed that he was satisfied with her. They hadn't done a thing, it seemed to her, and she couldn't grasp any of it yet. She started out, with relief, for Letty's house. She was utterly tired—so tired. Her cheeks were lengthened; her eyes were holes. Her heart reached across a city to Blake, to feel him near her. But anyhow, at least for this day, the prospect looked bright.

CHAPTER SIX

FROM the start, Grace had in her favor one trait without which there would be no good salesmen and no good press agents. She had little consciousness of the unexpressed rights, wishes, and emotions of other people. Her personality was like a huge shadow going before her. She kept her eyes straight on it and never noticed what it encompassed in its circumference. An obstacle had to be very definite before she would see that the shadow suddenly ended, that it had been interfered with.

This trait helped her to seem competent and poised during the next few days, while all the time her mind was busily sorting her experiences into some sort of order for future guidance. She and Al had to "plant," that is to insinuate, as many items about Annabella's opening

as possible into the dramatic columns of the papers for Monday. For Tuesday they had to get more and bigger stories; for Wednesday even more and even bigger stories. On Thursday, the day of the opening, the guns had to blaze full blast. The time before Annabella's début was the time of most strenuous effort for them. If Annabella "made a hit," a certain amount of notice would thereafter come to her naturally and accumulate with slighter aid from the press agents. Otherwise, they would have to redouble their ingenuity to keep her name green during the latter period of her engagement. It was earnestly to be hoped that Annabella would be a success.

At the same time, they had to "plant the time stuff," that is, arrange for pictures and notices in weeklies and in Sunday sections which were made up long ahead. Grace had been instructed in some of the ramifications of Harry Strauss's business. He was not only Annabella's press agent, he was also her agent and would have to find work for her in future. He handled the publicity for the night club, too, Grace learned. This made their task more difficult, since they had to be sure to get the name of the club used in papers where it would do the most good, in papers read by people who presumably had money to spend on night clubs—and these were the very papers which pretended to be above them.

From her former vantage point on the Brooklyn *Press,* Grace had thought the work of press agents (publicity representatives they liked to call themselves, and soon, no doubt, they would be "publicists") easy and well paid. She had supposed that she would sit at a

desk and telephone and send stories down by messenger or through the mail, as other of her press-agent acquaintances did. But Mr. Strauss made it a cautious rule to expect the impossible of his employees. Grace and Al had to go from paper to paper with folders of pictures and sheaves of stories, peddling their wares. Although Mr. Strauss had instructed them to work apart, they "made the rounds" together. Al insisted, and Grace, at first, thought he might be a help.

Standing in the outer rooms of the more formal editorial offices, where a boy transmitted their names, it appeared that Al had contacts everywhere, knew everyone—very well. He called everybody of importance on the papers by his or her first name. By his account, he had roomed with this one, played poker with that one, stayed up drinking half the night with someone else; had found a job for one, lent money to another. When, however, they finally arrived before the desk of the particular dramatic editor with whom Al had been so intimate, Al's face seemed to return to the editor's mind in a haze of the most indistinct recognition.

Grace, too, had met most of the people, but in their offices they seemed more hurried, more preoccupied, than they had seemed outside. Al might have been the cause. Some were curt with him.

Walking out of one office, he grabbed Grace's arm and made as if to spit. He relieved his feelings: "Y'd think he was Jesus Christ! The lousy bastard! And y'know how much that guy makes? Sixty dollars a week!"

They went from Vesey Street into the mold and under-elevated darkness of Church, turned down a street

near the river, sunny, broken up with low, sagging structures, smelling of markets and horse dung and wagonloads of vegetables. A truckman clucked to his horses in front of the old *Globe* building, which had been a car barn. A sense of hollow, dusty wood, steeped in years of grime, a strong, sour odor, followed them up stairs which were not too solid under their feet. Al wanted to place a feature story here for Monday.

Between editions, the city room drowsed among its tatters. Even the A. P. and City News machines clicked sleepily near a circle of copy desk where men were busy with blue pencils and pieces of paper. A mild copy boy waited till they accosted him and then jerked his finger toward a desk. A young man with a face from which he had ejected all emotion rose and looked over their heads. He was in shirt sleeves and wore his hat. There exists no combination more hard-boiled.

Al's eyes became pools of yearning truth, his manner gentle, good-humored, even faintly rueful, but persistent. He edged up to the man. He began to explain.

" . . . Of course, it sounds like a press-agent yarn. But Annabella Arden says that she feels her husband's presence sort of always in the air with her. [Gestures] No—no ouija board, no spiritualism, but just his spirit around her."

Grace squirmed.

After a moment, the man said expressionlessly that he might be able to use an interview with Annabella in the early edition Monday. He would see about it in the morning. He sat down. He fastened his eyes to a length of white paper.

They were so astonished that they had reached the door before Al came to with a great start. He stopped a copy boy, demanded the hard-boiled one's name. They made a special trip back. Al took out a card and put it before the man. He fervently held out his hand. The hard-boiled one shook it. "I want you to meet Miss Kline, Mr. Wodehard."

As they went out, Al's face was serene with duty performed. He had made another contact.

"He's a good chap to know. Assistant city editor."

"Do you think he'll actually use the story?" said Grace.

"Why not? I betcha he sends a reporter up tomorrow. Why not? They gotta have something to fill up the paper Monday mornings. We gotta remind him, of course. I tell you when I get a hunch, Grace——"

Grace didn't believe it. She fancied there had been a gleam of shared amusement in the hard-boiled one's eyes when they had met her own. She would not have approached him like that.

She wondered why Mr. Strauss had made such a point of dividing the papers. To try her out? Would Al attempt to take all the credit for the notices which they were thus placing together?

"Now listen, Grace," Al assured her, "you can tell Harry you did it all by yourself! I wouldn't care. Say, I been working for Harry since he started out by himself. I got a ten per cent interest in the business. Harry's a hard guy to work for but I can get along with him. Every so often he gets a grouch on and lets out at me, but I got an interest in the business, so before he goes

home he calls me in and we kiss and make up. Harry pays me $110 a week besides my profit—I guess I get more than you. Harry's told me what he pays you, and believe me you're earning every cent you get."

He looked at her acutely. She was about to say that she made only forty a week—the glance seemed to demand it—but saved herself in time. She did not yet know whether or not to believe Al.

After her silence he said, with some disappointment, "You don't talk much, do you?"

She made up her mind not to depend too much on his chatter and his good nature, to be on her guard.

It was twilight now. They were walking arm in arm across Columbus Circle from the *Evening Journal,* Grace exhausted, even Al dragging his feet.

Grace had still to return to the office. She meant to write a story about the six dresses which Annabella Arden would offer to poor working girls. As it was Grace's idea, Al had disregarded it in their brief encounters with the city rooms, but, seizing a moment and an assistant city editor of a paper which specialized in legs and actresses, Grace had managed to make the suggestion. He had grasped at it. "That's not bad. Are you peddling this around to all the papers or is it an exclusive story?" he demanded. Al opened his mouth. Grace said quickly, "Exclusive." "You get it to me Monday, with pictures, and I'll give you a five-column layout. Can't promise what day. Maybe Tuesday. But it's an exclusive story, now? You're sure of that?" Grace said she was sure. She was overwhelmed.

Outside, Al fell upon her. "Never promise an ex-

clusive story!" he cried. "We coulda planted that all over town, all the front pages! And you go give it to him exclusive! Jesus Christ!"

"But a five-column layout!" said Grace.

They had argued about it, Al declaring that they must offer the story elsewhere, too; Grace repeating that it was poor business to go back on a promise to a paper. "Aw, promises!" said Al cockily. "If we gotta good story, they'll come eatin' out of our hands. To hell with 'em!"

It was the one bright spot in the long day for Grace. Now, when Miss MacAlister had left her typewriter, would be a good time to write it. She hoped that Mr. Strauss had left too.

On each of their sallies back to the office Harry Strauss had been sitting at his desk over a pile of canceled checks, dealing them out as if he were playing solitaire, shuffling them between thumb and finger as bank tellers shuffle and count paper money. Sometimes she had to use the telephone on Miss MacAlister's desk and she could feel him watching through the open door, counting each call she made. She knew he listened because once, while Al was arguing over the telephone with an advertising man (the office also placed advertisements for clients) Mr. Strauss had called in his resonant, decisive voice, continuing to deal his checks: "Hang up on him! Hang up on him!" He looked up at her whenever she entered the office but made no comment. Only, Al warned her, "Don't make too many phone calls. Harry don't like that."

Once she had dared to hint for a messenger. She was

speaking to Al in the outer office. Mr. Strauss called through instantly and bitterly, "And who's going to pay for the messenger? You'd be surprised how easy it is to send stuff around by messenger, my dear, and how easy it is then to throw it in the wastebasket. I've been doing publicity for thirty years—I know."

He was not there now, thank goodness! She let herself in with Al's key, took her hat off her aching forehead, and laid her head against the wide black paper holder of the machine. It felt cool and smooth. She could do nothing but sit still for a while.

Later, she was still sitting before a sheet of yellow paper in the typewriter. Under the yellow stare of the electric light she typed feverishly, tore out the paper, crumpled it. Balls of crumpled paper fell, one after another, into the wastebasket. What *was* the matter with her? She had been accustomed to write quite easily items, interviews with actresses, but she had not counted on the paralyzing self-consciousness which seizes a press agent who must get a certain name into a story. The name was no longer one among many but *the* name in the whole world. No matter where she put it, it seemed to poke out, swell, and spread over the paper. How should she slip in the name of the club? "Slip" was the word. There was an element of guilt and stealth in it. The story must not sound like a press-agent yarn.

When she had finally pounded it out the story sounded to her like nothing but a press-agent yarn. She read it with eyes so exhausted that they stung and stuck. "Would any poor working girl like a new dance frock? . . . awaiting her choice in the wardrobe . . .

of ANNABELLA ARDEN. . . . The dresses were put into the bottom of a deep trunk and forgotten, together with other souvenirs. . . . NOW ANNABELLA ARDEN is making her return appearance . . . at the CLUB MIRAFLORE Thursday night. . . ." The name of Annabella Arden seemed to be on every line and that of the club on every other.

The back of her neck felt permanently bent and the soles of her feet burned as they touched the ground.

The next morning, Saturday, Grace thought there might be a lull. But she found Al lying in wait for her the moment she entered the office. He was sorting a mass of flimsy sheets on which were typed short, final announcements of the opening. Addressed envelopes flew toward him out of the stenographer's machine.

"Now, we gotta get these to everybody to-day," cried Al. "Come on, Grace, lend a hand. And listen, I gotta get ahold of that City News man. He'll send it over the wire."

"You don't really think City News will let that go over the wire?" said Grace involuntarily. Her eyes took in the slew of papers and envelopes. "And—how *can* we deliver all this to-day?"

"You watch me," said Al. "I'll show you."

In a daze, she began to sort the envelopes. She counted forty. Some, however, were addressed to different departments of the same papers. She put her hand to her head and exchanged a long look with the stenographer and Miss MacAlister giggled. In time, Grace would learn that the Harry Strauss system, the Broadway system, was to bite off everything within reach, regardless of

whether or not it could be chewed; afterward, the undigested bits, unfinished matter, would be spewed about. She was still taking instructions too literally.

When this task was over, Al was lying in wait for her again.

"Now listen, Grace, one thing we forgot. We didn't get anything to Arch Seuer down at the *Dress Daily*. He'll give us a good break, and Harry's sure to put up a holler if we miss him. All the salesmen and buyers read that paper—go to night clubs. So you type a special note for Seuer and go down there right away—and grab all the envelopes you can and deliver all you can on your way—and meet me at the *Sun* at four."

Grace hastened down to the *Dress Daily*. She had meant to see Mr. Milford again anyway. It would be wise to thank him. Besides, he sometimes used sketches of actresses' clothes if they were decorated in a way to suit his column. Grace had seen some block-printed garments in Annabella's wardrobe. But she remembered something, something unpleasant, something that had pulled her shadow up short and forced her to take notice, in Mr. Milford's department. What was it?—oh, yes—that girl, his secretary. She certainly didn't like her, Grace. Grace had to pause and consider this. Unwitting, Anita Vestry had chosen a perfect path to Grace's interest. A person who didn't like Grace and was not afraid to show it disturbed her, even caused her some fear. What was it that they saw in her to scorn? Could they be holding some secret harm in store for her? Did they know—know about her?

Grace saw that Mr. Milford was not in. Miss Vestry

stood by his desk with her back to the door. After Grace had done her errand she walked past again, and now Miss Vestry was typing. But she didn't look up. She wore the same brown tweed suit; her profile was just as stern. Grace halted by her desk and fixed large, worried, tentative eyes upon her. Miss Vestry waited for the other girl to speak.

"Do you think—that Mr. Milford," began Grace, swallowing nervously, "would use—any sketches of block-printed dresses? I'm—doing publicity for Annabella Arden, the dancer—and I saw some very unusual ones among her clothes."

Again Anita Vestry noticed the tenacious eyes, the halts between phrases, the curious way in which the girl's eyes advanced and the lower part of her face retreated as she talked. It was interesting to watch. She felt in better humor to-day and was a little ashamed of her pettish outburst at their first meeting.

"You'd have to ask him," she replied, yielding somewhat. "We haven't anything for next Saturday," she suggested.

"Would there be time—if I called up Monday?"

"Oh, yes. Plenty of time." She looked down at her hands on the typewriter keys.

Still Grace lingered. The other girl seemed so removed, regarding, but sealed against her. She searched for some way to penetrate herself into the other's consciousness. Suddenly she said, without really meaning to, "Look—Miss Arden opens Thursday night at the Club Miraflore. I—they say I can ask a lot of newspaper people. There'll be five tables. Wouldn't you—like to come?"

The hue of Miss Vestry's face softened into what was almost a blush and she gazed at Grace. In all the months she had been in New York, this was the first proffer of acquaintance, of pleasure, that had come her way, or that had come her way directly enough for her to notice. As luck would have it, she even owned a suitable dress; old, but seldom worn, it would do, and there was one man at her rooming house who, she thought, could serve as escort. But . . . Her mouth drew down again. She lowered her eyes to her hands, then raised them suddenly, frankly.

"I haven't got an evening wrap," she said, and grew red.

This was the best possible way to fix all of Grace's attention and sympathy. On this point of clothes Grace could enter at once into anyone's feelings. It was so engrossing, so sore a point with her. Didn't she herself have to—hadn't she had to as far back as she could remember—scrimp and plan and borrow and make over and make do? To her, too, any offer of amusement must bring as its first reaction the idea of what she could possibly wear. Perhaps that dress would do, but . . . Oh, yes! She knew. She reflected. She could wear her sealskin coat now. Letty—but Letty had been invited and would need her own wrap. Mrs. Kline, however, had an old cloth cape, gaily lined, which Grace had sometimes used for an evening cloak. She moved closer to Miss Vestry.

"I have a wrap I could lend you," she said. "Do come."

"Oh." Miss Vestry's face was wholly open, wholly

grateful. "All right," she said, and smiled, a twinkling smile. She made a great concession. "I—I'll talk to Mr. Milford about those sketches."

"Oh, *thank* you!" said Grace. "Then that's settled. I'll—get the wrap down to you on Thursday. Good-bye."

On the way out she spent a few minutes concerning herself with this girl. She felt more than curiosity, a sort of imaginative wonder about her, which was unusual. What was her life? How did she manage? Whom would she bring to the club? Even—what were her thoughts? Grace felt pleased with herself, with her impulse and with its results, of which she could approve.

The envelopes she carried soon shook her out of reverie. She began to hurry and worry and close off her mind. She flew uptown, then she flew downtown. There was an engagement with Blake in the offing, one of the few evening engagements he could permit himself. She didn't mean to miss it, but she had to. When she met Al at the *Sun* not even her own share of envelopes had been delivered, and Al, as usual, recollected numerous additional duties.

They sped from paper to paper, from Dramatic Department to Dramatic Department, from one yellow, tiredly glaring, dusty city room to the next. From Park Place they walked across City Hall Park, black and quiet, with huddled figures on the steps of the City Hall; newspaper vendors, small oases of noise, shouting their wares down the wind. The tiny, tireless lights gleamed along Park Row. The Woolworth Building stood deserted, above it all, white and high, like a dream in

youth. They went down several black steps, felt a black square about them, and there were the delivery trucks of the *American,* the hoarse, bare bowels of its building swallowed them. Men looked up at Grace from under green eyeshades with the instantaneous, naïve interest of newspapermen in a pretty girl, any girl. She made a moment to call Blake when he should have reached the restaurant and arranged to see him later at the theater. He was sulky, but it couldn't be helped.

She and Al walked arm in arm from outside darkness into yellow light, rush, and noise, then into darkness again, into the desert, with its small islands of power, which this section was at night; glad of each other's company, glad of a parallel effort against the forceful, whirring, harassed indifference of the presses, felt now in the dusky air, but neither heard nor seen.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE Club Miraflore was below sidewalk level; a few steps down, an office by the window, very wide, carpeted stairs leading farther down to the cloakroom and the dance floor. The owner, a tall and handsome Irishman, approved of Grace's looks, of the sort of plaintive simplicity with which she accepted orders then, when she was not yet habituated to these people. He did not sling her about as he slung Al. All the same, she understood why even Al disliked to work with night clubs. From the man at the desk, who noted reservations, to the proprietor, everyone's eyes had a hard gleam; everyone had a suspicious, calculating hospitality; everyone watched to see in whose back it would be easiest to plunge a knife.

Grace had been asked to come early Thursday night

to receive the newspaper guests, so, still literal, she was the first to arrive. She entered nervous and worn.

Since Monday she and Al had been buying all the morning papers and all the evening papers (Harry Strauss wouldn't order or pay for papers) frantically scanning them, clipping and hoarding scraps of newsprint, little notices, and exhibiting them to Mr. Strauss. The "breaks" had been good, Al said. They had got in one journal a front-page story about the insurance of Annabella's legs. The five-column layout had appeared. But she could never tell whether Mr. Strauss was pleased or not. He sniffed at the small items and looked down his nose, cautiously, at the large ones. That morning Mr. Strauss had called them both in. On his desk lay the New York *Times*. He pointed to a box, front page, top column.

As they were not handling the publicity for Annabella's partner, they had carefully omitted his name from the announcements, but they had, nevertheless, been obliged to attach it to the photographs of the new dance step. An evening paper, remarking that he had the same name as the son of a millionaire banker, had, without further ado, printed a half column about the banker's son acting as Annabella's partner. Al and Grace had seen this and congratulated themselves on the "break." Both Annabella's name and the name of the club held prominent places in the story. But the *Times,* which they had not yet examined, had taken the trouble to verify. The banker's son would *not* appear with Annabella; he had, in fact, changed his given name to avoid constant confusion with the partner.

There it was in a front-page box of the New York *Times*—acme of publicity. Annabella's name was mentioned once. The name of the club was not. The partner's name, however, was given several times.

Al and Grace drew a deep breath. They were about to burst with elation. Al, hushed, with eyes that bulged as at some act of God, read the notice over Mr. Strauss's shoulder, "Gee! Front-page box!"

"Who's responsible for this?" snapped Mr. Strauss.

Grace and Al glanced at each other. Both would have liked to take the credit. Neither wished to admit that they were not responsible at all. It was just an accident —a glorious accident.

Mr. Strauss said quietly, cuttingly, "Puffed up with yourselves, aren't you?"

Al made excited gestures. "Jesus Christ! What the hell d'y'want us to do, Harry? Here we get a box in the *Times*——"

"Yeh. You get a box in the *Times* for that bastard," sneered Mr. Strauss. "Who's paying for this, the Miraflore or that lousy hoofer?"

"But what the hell d'y'expect us to do?" cried Al in despair. "Did we plant that story, Grace? You tell Harry. See! The *Times* got it themselves. What the hell can *we* do about it?"

"What the hell am I paying you for?" inquired Mr. Strauss. "To get publicity for Annabella and the Miraflore, or for a bum hoofer?"

They had walked out much subdued.

"We're all right," Al muttered. "Harry always expects the world. He promises the world. Gee! A front-

page box with Annabella's name! I wish we were working for that partner, too. He's good-better'n she is. Who's Annabella anyhow? Just a dizzy blonde hoofer, that's all she is."

Publicity, Grace had noticed, had its first and fullest effect on Al. On the days when Annabella "got" little or nothing in the papers, his opinion of her sank; on the days when she "got a break," she rose in his esteem.

Grace and her mother were still barely speaking so she had not dared to ask Mrs. Kline to make a new dress. She wore to the opening an old dark brown lace, the color of her eyes, with a trailing orange sash. It was becoming enough, but, as usual, there was a wrong note to cause unease. Her short sealskin coat was not really an evening wrap, merely very obviously masquerading as one. When she had checked it she felt better.

Then, the five tables for the newspapers developed into one long table almost against the orchestra. And she and Al had invited so many people! Ought she to speak about that? She didn't know what to do. The orchestra was tuning up, squawking and piping. The round rows of tables were glassy white, ghastly; the waiters stood against the wall. Mr. Larchmont, the owner, came over and inspected her in one sharp glance from bare shoulders to tapered ankles.

"Everything all right?" he said. She nodded. "Now, all I ask of you is this—if any of these newspaper fellas show up not in evening clothes, please see that they sit *away* from the dance floor. This is an exclusive club, you know. Lots of society people will be here to-night. I don't want them to get the idea we let *anybody* in."

He snorted at the very thought. "Do you understand?" Again she nodded. "And if they want anything—a little—" he made a wide open motion of his hand—"just ask the waiter. They can't have the whole cellar, y'understand—but there's plenty of it." He gave her a brisk, charming smile, a smile of approval, and went away.

The next to arrive were Letty and Harold Moses. Grace had begged them to hurry. They were not newspaper people, of course, but whenever Grace could find a loophole to drag Letty in, to share anything with her, she did so.

Letty was giggling.

"Gee, we're the acrobats, we're opening the show. Harold almost died when he saw the empty tables. I couldn't get him in, almost. Where's Blake?"

"He wouldn't come so early."

"He's right," grumbled Harold. He was a man of thirty, dark, clean-shaven, well dressed. He looked steady. The idea of making himself conspicuous in any way, even as the first to arrive at a night club, bothered him.

Letty caught the eye of the orchestra leader and would have signaled. Harold put down her hand.

"I know he'd play for us if we asked him," said Letty, tapping a small, light foot. "Oh, Gee! Harold, the old spoil-sport. Is Blake really coming?"

"Yes. We—arranged *that*," said Grace. Letty always gave her composure and a feeling of maturity.

"Wife hasn't gone yet?"

"Not till next week."

Harold smoked and looked away. This business of running around with a married man. He disapproved of both Blake and Grace, but of Grace most. Letty never considered Blake's wife at all, but Harold, strangely enough, did. He felt sorry for her and in accord with her, as if, though he had never seen the woman, he realized that they shared a mutual trouble, that they were both on the side of the easily overlooked.

"Blake'll dance with me anyhow—if Harold won't."

Harold couldn't help looking alarmed.

"Who do you think called me up the other day? Paul! Yop. And I can't even see him, Harold's so mean about it."

Harold's lips shut in an unhappy line. He was determined at any rate not to be on the side of the deceived.

"He *did!* Can't keep away, can he?" said Grace, who knew very well that Letty would manage to see Paul. Probably her aid would be enlisted in the arrangement. At the same time, she sympathized with Harold and changed the subject. "My Gawd! Isn't anyone ever coming to this night club?"

People were straggling in, though very slowly. The orchestra played once or twice, the sad, calling notes of orchestras on empty dance floors. Without a human response, dance music was the loneliest music on earth, Grace thought.

After theater time, after eleven, the club began to seem appreciably warmer and warmer, gayer and gayer; there was talk now and the waiters flew, and the orchestra became cheerful with appreciation. Lovely

dresses and lovely faces bloomed about them. Letty and Grace envied the corsages of orchids. Their table was rather silent. A newspaperman had appeared with a large wife, pathetically pleasant. The newspaperman drank. There was the photographer, Al's friend, with a girl from the *Telegraph*.

At midnight Blake walked in, very pale under the lights, and sat mutely by Letty, dancing only when she asked him. Grace knew that he disliked this environment. It made him feel poorer and shabbier than ever. He did not smoke and turned the water glass with his highball round and round in his hand. But Grace could not give him any attention. Two newspapermen, acquaintances of hers, had also come. She danced with one, then the other, then brought them to Letty. Letty rose to dance and Grace slipped into her chair. She had no time to talk to Blake, however; the wife of the newspaperman leaned over the table and preëmpted her. With her eyes, Grace beseeched Blake to dance with this woman, knowing it would be useless. He was comfortable, sitting there silent, and would be oblivious to all else.

At the same time, she had a glimpse of Miss Vestry with a quite presentable man in tow. They were weaving their way between tables and among dancers going and coming. Miss Vestry looked better than Grace had expected. She had pretty, short hair, reddish brown. Grace introduced her to Blake. She had to rise then to dance and, watching from the floor, she saw, over and under heads, that Miss Vestry was actually talking to Blake, very brightly. She brushed by Letty.

"Who is *that* girl?" said Letty.

"Go over and see if Blake needs rescuing," said Grace over her shoulder.

"He doesn't look it," said Letty swiftly, and tripped away in her partner's arms.

When Grace returned to the table Miss Vestry was on the opposite side, at the other end. Grace made a moment to lean over Blake and whisper, "Was it terrible? I'm sorry."

"Oh, she was telling me a funny story about a taxi driver," said Blake with a smile.

So Grace contemplated Miss Vestry across the table with a new curiosity. What was there to her? Blake was usually annoyed by strangers.

The fusion of the group no longer depended on Grace. The separate elements had been welded for the moment, in some way, into one note of enjoyment. Even the talk was unrecognizable by individual voices. The party had a voice of its own, confused and gay. Harry Strauss walked over from his table, his shock of hair more vigorously silver than ever, and patted her arm. "Everything all right? All the liquor you want?" Then Al burst upon them, holding tight by the elbow a lady in an orchid gown, expansive so that there seemed to be dozens of Als, whacking all the men on their backs and bending close to the bare shoulders of all the girls. He didn't know Blake but he slapped him on the back too. Blake flushed and sat up straighter.

"That fella on a paper?" said Al to Grace. "No? Gee, I thought I knew him. Oh, he came with *you,* huh?" he said with a knowing intonation. Grace had to remind

herself that that tone of voice was habit. Al knew nothing, could know nothing whatever. "So only three showed up. Well, that don't mean a thing. All the fellas say they'll come and then nobody shows up. We—we're *all right,*" he cried, putting his arm about the back of her chair in the excess of his spirits. "We'll make it. This is a good party." He spread the palm of his hand emphatically before her nose. "Wait till you see Annabella. Say, that baby's got something up her sleeve. She'll be a knockout."

"Where did *you* see her?" said Grace.

"I saw her. I saw her," shouted Al, and frisked away. Blake and Letty moved across several vacant chairs to her side. Everyone else was dancing. Directly opposite, Anita Vestry and Harold were in close conversation.

"I don't want to pry, but may I know *what* you and Harold can find to discuss so earnestly for half an hour?" called Letty above the noise of the orchestra.

Harold looked up and Miss Vestry reddened a little.

"We're talking about Trenton," she said. "I come from Trenton."

"Oh, my Gosh!" said Letty. "He's telling you about *lace* mills, then. I never knew anyone who talked more about *lace* mills."

Miss Vestry laughed. "No. We're talking about potteries."

"*Potteries!* Do I get *potteries* for breakfasts and dinners now?" It was a comic wail of despair.

Everybody laughed. And then, as she was talking, Miss Vestry noticed that everyone had been eliminated, everyone but Grace and Blake. Strange how, as she

chatted with Letty Moses, she had also to be aware of what those two said. Perhaps it was the penetrating character of Grace's voice, the pause between phrases, which kept the ear subconsciously waiting, watching for the continuing phrase. Perhaps it was a curious tenseness of atmosphere. The pair seemed to gather the air around them and raise and hold it to some higher point where they alone sat. Or perhaps it was only because they seemed so utterly unaware of other people, looked and spoke and acted at and for each other. Anita Vestry could feel the three-cornered conversation waning, dying of its unimportance, as if the ears and attention of the others were also fixed elsewhere upon something more dominant. Yet Grace and Blake were saying little.

"When—must you leave?" Grace was asking.

"Two. I'm supposed to be working at Bill's house."

"Does Bill know it?"

"Mmm."

"Is she really going next week then?"

There was no answer. Grace desisted. She always knew just the moment to stop, had learned it patiently and profited by her experience. She said, "Anyhow, you'll have time to see our Annabella perform."

All the dancers were returning to their tables. The floor was cleared. A woman sang. Al had moved a chair between tables, regardless of the frowns of Mr. Larchmont and of the waiters, and sat at ease with his feet spread in front of him. When he caught Grace's eye he winked and made violent, jovial signals.

Annabella appeared in a white, downy dress, with her partner, sliding like a large swan through the motions

of a formal waltz. This was a tribute to Gene Arden, who had been a ballroom dancer. A few people pattered their hands. The next number belonged to Annabella alone; then she met her partner and the two performed some pretty, jigging steps. Alone again, she was better but not very exciting. There was light applause—and intermission.

Al rushed over.

"This is just the beginning. Wait, you ain't seen nothin' yet."

Grace glanced toward Harry Strauss's table and felt depressed. Mr. Strauss was looking down his long nose, tapping a glass with his fingernail.

"He doesn't seem pleased," she said. "If she's no better than this——"

"Say, don't you worry!" cried Al. "That kid has the stuff. This is just a starter. She's a little scared, see? But she's got something up her sleeve you don't know nothin' about." The music began. "Watch this now. You'll see." He scurried away.

"He always knows so much," she murmured to Blake.

"Mmm. That's the Broadway act," said Blake.

Suddenly the circle of dance floor was flooded with a light that made it waver in long lines as if it were not wood but water. Annabella entered. Was it Annabella? Everyone sat up. The baby face was gone. This woman had no face—her face couldn't be noticed or recollected. She wore a short skirt of green grass apparently, and a band of grass lightly confined her breasts. The middle of her torso was bare, gracious,

wide, and white. It was flat but not thin; the softness of the flesh was evident. She took a few steps directly within the light. She turned and sang, kicked out, danced. All at once she stood still. Her hips swayed. The audience breathed heavily. She was no longer Annabella Arden or anybody. She had completely, unconsciously visualized herself into a symbol. She was a woman—the woman. Holding herself still, the woman moved her body from the hips. The woman's white flesh rippled as a ray of white light ripples on a clear stream, and she threw up one white arm like a call. As she pranced, she sang, and it was as if she whinnied.

"Well," cried Al, hollering above the thud of feet and hands, the applause, the calls, and mopping his brow. "Wha'd I tell you? Look at Harry now."

Harry Strauss was clapping and nodding his head slowly and definitely. Variations of the shimmy were still novel that year.

"She's a knockout! I bet Harry's glad now he tied her up."

"Do you mean to say Mr. Strauss didn't know about —this?"

"Oh, he knew. But he didn't know how this belly-dancing, what-you-call-it, would go in a ritzy club like the Miraflore. Larchmont didn't want to try it."

"It would go anywhere, from a honky-tonk up," said Blake. He had to raise his voice. There was still applause.

"You in show business?" cried Al.

Blake rose and spoke to Grace. "I'd better run along now before the encore."

"Don't—mind about me. I'm staying with Let tonight anyhow."

It hadn't occurred to Blake to mind about her, she saw. Once this would have hurt her, now she was resigned. That was just Blake's way. He was sorry and took her hand gently, in front of Al, to make up for his remissness.

"Hey, ain't he taking you home?" cried Al. "Say, there's a chance for *me* now!"

Blake went at once.

After the encore Grace dragged Letty off the dance floor to go home. Miss Vestry was just leaving, too. Letty said to her with enthusiasm, "Come and see us sometime, call me up, won't you?"

Harold yawned widely in the taxi and Letty, animated as ever, gave him a push and a kiss. "The tired old business man. Well, your evening wasn't lost, was it? Just think of all the great big potteries you discussed with Miss—Miss—what was that girl's name?"

"Vestry. She seems to be all right. Blake liked her," said Grace.

"And so do I," declared Letty. "I asked her to call me up. Why don't you bring her along, Gracie, some Sunday maybe? I mean it. That's a nice girl, intelligent."

"Sunday? Oh. That—reminds me. What are—your plans—Sunday after next? I—was going to borrow your apartment."

"Uh-huh." By a direct look Letty signified that they had best discuss this when they were alone. Harold had turned away his face, twisted with irritation and embarrassment.

CHAPTER EIGHT

On the Sunday which Grace had reserved, the Moseses came home in ill humor from a vaudeville show and a walk. It was a cold November afternoon, blanketed in the lethargy of the day of rest, with a wind which swept along the closed shop windows on Fifth Avenue and between the people on Broadway and left both streets naked—naked and dull. Harold wished to return home as quickly as possible, but Letty said the walk would do them good. He suspected that she had promised not to come back before a certain hour.

Nor did their house seem much more cheerful to him than the street. It consisted of a tiny entrance, one square room, and behind that a doorless alcove through whose looped, glossy curtains twin beds could be seen. There was also a bit of tiled kitchenette near the entrance. Everything was in order. Everything shone with the chill, dustless luster of the apartment house itself, its mirrored elevator and its hall boys. And over

everything lay a special Sunday atmosphere, like a heavy gray enamel.

Blake and Grace were sitting on the couch, rolling private jokes between them. *They* were happy enough. To Harold their good cheer was the final straw. One couldn't even be alone in one's own house with one's own troubles without the mood of those two interfering. He went into the bathroom, the only unoccupied room in the house, and banged the door.

Grace lifted her brows in sincere surprise. "What is it now?"

"Oh-h," said Letty with a long, a gusty sigh, "don't ask me! It started with his insurance and then went on and on and on."

She threw off her coat and sat down beside Blake. He put an arm around her and they kissed each other while Grace regarded them with an encouraging, a mock-coy amusement. She often spoke of the attachment between Blake and Letty. She even urged them to flirt a bit, serving up Letty's kisses as an extra fillip to Blake and feeling secure with the knowledge that these were passed out always through a window in the solid barrier of Letty's loyalty to her, a window which had been opened by her permission and would be sealed at her behest. It was not so much that she trusted Letty—only Letty was that kind of a girl; her friends' preserves were so enclosed in her mind that they were practically invisible. Of course, if their friendship no longer existed—"If I should die for instance," Grace often said meditatively, "you two might—start something."

Harold understood the situation, too, but this did not mean that he enjoyed it. He went to the armchair by the window. Grace and Blake were now rolling their special jokes on to Letty, but Harold was left to smile out in the cold; not intentionally, more as if the circle of three had too close a harmony to need or permit of additions. From experience, he knew that it would not be possible for him to start a new conversation. If he tried, if even Letty tried, Blake's voice, which was a little hoarse, as if with weariness, and Grace's contralto and Grace's characteristic laugh would separate the words, brush them aside, distract the attention. Neither Harold nor Letty could attach as much importance to what each said as Blake and Grace apparently could to what they said. Grace made of each laugh a particular tribute to Blake as king, to herself as queen. It was too deep and too prolonged for a snigger, but she laughed, drawing the laughter inside of herself, arching her shoulders, curling her lips, lifting her head, making a distinct point of each gesture, as if her amusement had a distinct significance, an appreciation peculiar to herself and necessarily transcending all other appreciation.

"Tell us about Harry Strauss and his nickel," said Blake to her.

"Oh, yes. The other day I was telephoning and Harry, as usual, was listening. Before I got through he called, 'Don't hang up; I want to talk to him.' Well, you know how it is when you're—busy and you're telephoning. When I was through I—instinctively hung up, just as Harry made a move to grab the phone. He

shook his head, went 'Tch. Tch,' and I said, 'Oh, I'm sorry, I'll get him right back,' and I started to—call the number again. And Harry said, shaking his finger at me, 'Listen, my dear, you ought to be more careful. Every time you do that it costs a nickel!' "

Letty trilled laughter. "Oh, my Gosh! Why'n't you tell him you'd give him the nickel?"

"Oh, I couldn't do that, Letty," said Grace reprovingly. "But Blake and I—" she began to curl her lips and arch her shoulders, looking from person to person —"Blake and I—have decided to call him It-costs-a-nickel-Harry!" And she began her deep, prolonged, continuous snigger.

Then Blake told them about another publicity man who had the habit of adding, at the top of each news note, an impassioned plea for its publication, concluding with the bribe of eternal gratitude from him and his employer. His first name was Mike, so, as he and the employer were both notorious for their piety, some of the dramatic editors had nicknamed him For-Christ's-sake-print-this-Mike.

When he was done he looked solely at Grace and she rewarded him. They were, or considered themselves to be, too unsentimental to use endearments in front of other people, but they began a sort of wrestling match which was a form of endearment. It was a sophisticated wrestling match; merely a pulling and bending of arms with a vast deal of deliberate mirth on Grace's part. There was none of the apparent indelicacy of a pair cooing before others, yet they were so self-sufficient, they erased everyone else so completely, that even Letty

sought to detach their interest from each other. As for Harold, he looked out of the window and smoked, first cigarettes, then a pipe. Harold would have liked Blake by himself; with Grace he frequently found him insufferable.

Finally Letty attracted Blake's attention by some question about what he would like to eat.

He paused in the wrestling match and said with complete naturalness, "I can't stay."

"You can't stay to-night?" cried Letty. "But——"

Grace was slowly disengaging herself. It was understood that Blake had to filch these Sunday afternoons from his wife; he was always supposed to be working on his play at a friend's house and he usually had to be back for supper. But—the same thought was in the minds of both girls—this was the first Sunday of his wife's absence, the first day in months which he and Grace had had absolutely to themselves.

She said, "Don't you want any supper?" It was a carefully surprised question, not a demand.

"Bill asked me over there for supper."

Something of Grace's rigidity penetrated even to him.

He glanced at her and muttered, as if against his will, "We were going to work to-night anyway."

For a second she could not answer. She had planned this Sunday to be so perfect, unmarred by that shade of prior claim, unjarred by the necessity for departure at a set hour. Sudden sensations of revolt swarmed within her like a disturbed hornet's nest. She felt her voice

freezing with the effort to keep it tearless and unexacting.

Presently, she said, "Oh. I wish—you'd tell me those things in time—so I could—make—my own plans."

"Well, you can stay here now, can't you?" said Blake through tighter lips.

"So I can—now," she said quietly, "but I might have made—other arrangements."

She did not mean to let Blake depart in sullenness, however. It was one of her axioms never to permit even the slightest breach to remain unadjusted overnight, "never to sleep on a quarrel." No telling what depths it might borrow from the thoughtful spaciousness of the night! She followed him to the entrance, from which could be heard her special laughter accompanying their lingering embrace.

Then Grace, Harold, and Letty were left alone.

"You might go down and get something to eat," suggested Letty, speaking to Harold for the first time. "Everything's a lot cheaper at that little delicatessen on Broadway and they won't deliver. I've argued and argued with them and they won't."

"Of course they won't," grumbled Harold. "That's how they can afford to sell cheaper. Can't you get it through your head that when production costs are higher, prices must rise? You're like all consumers——"

"Oh, you and your old production costs!" cried Letty. "Very well. I'm a consumer and I don't care who knows it! I don't give a rap about producers. I'm a consumer. I consume." She flounced over to the telephone in the alcove.

Grace began to talk amicably to Harold, trying to "smooth him over."

"Speaking of production costs," she said, "do you know—you have an admirer? Remember that Miss Vestry who held forth on potteries? She was all het up—when I told her you were a manager in an underwear factory. Said she'd like to know one person in New York who didn't have some job connected with words."

"That's a funny idea," said Harold unwillingly.

And, "What was that?" demanded Letty as she flung herself back on the couch. "Have you been seeing her?"

"Yes. I had dinner with her last week. She's a funny girl but—sort of interesting. She's all alone here, lives in a weird rooming house. I asked her why she didn't try for a job in the Fashion Department and she said she hated the *Dress Daily* and hated all the jobs that had sprung up around words. She said when Mr. Milford started to dictate she felt like—a fly caught in a spider's web! She told me she wished she could find something to do in a place where they *made*—things. No wonder she knew so much about potteries. It seems her father is a potter or something like that."

"I always hated stenography, too," declared Letty. "All that stew and fuss to write a lot of bunk!"

"You wouldn't know anything about it," put in Harold. "You were a bum stenog."

"That's right. Take it out on me!"

The food, when it finally arrived, also had a veneer, the enameled sheen of the delicatessen. They served themselves dabs of many things, one plate to a person,

put the plates on paper napkins in their laps, and ate, mostly in silence till Harold remarked that, considering the young fortune Letty spent on food, it was remarkable how rotten this supper could taste.

"Yes," said Letty bitterly, "and you heard what I got, Grace, when I tried to save some money. And I was bawled out for extravagance all through a vaudeville show just because I asked him to raise my clothes allowance!"

Harold gave Letty a look which said, "How dare you bring that girl into our affairs?" All the same, he could not help defending himself. "I told you why I couldn't raise your clothes allowance. I'm taking out more insurance. Letty doesn't understand that that's more for her benefit than extra clothes."

"I'd rather have the clothes," said Letty. "You're always worrying about what would become of me if anything happened to you. I never worry. It's not as if we had a family. I could go back to work."

"Mm. What would you do? You were just saying how you hated stenography."

Letty tossed her head. "Oh, well, I wouldn't work forever. It sounds vain—but I know I could always marry somebody or get kept or something." She shrugged.

Grace began the preliminary motions to her deep snigger.

"I dare say—Paul—would be glad to step into Harold's shoes," she suggested, emphasizing the joke with a coy lift of her brows.

Harold went over to the phonograph and put on a

record, and Letty behind his back made a warning "oh" of her mouth. She started to pile the dishes and carry them into the kitchenette, calling to Harold for assistance, but on her return trip she stopped by Grace and said something to her and giggled. Grace whispered, "You *did* see him?" Then she put her hand hastily over her mouth. Harold had also stepped out of the kitchenette. She didn't believe he had heard, but the expression of his face was so enraged that she grew pale for a moment and thought that really Letty tantalized him too much.

Neither Harold nor Letty spoke for some time. Although Grace realized that the former was angry and the latter uneasy, it would not occur to her that she could be involved. After an evening visit to Letty she nearly always stayed the night, so, with the assurance of precedent, she got up, said she was sleepy, and went into the alcove.

Even more than the clandestine use to which she put the apartment, this habit of hers irritated Harold. He had had many a quarrel with Letty over the requisitioning of their place Sunday afternoons and only an idea of the futility of the procedure restrained him from forbidding it. Letty was quite capable of lending the key anyhow and Grace of arranging matters so that he need never know. Whenever Grace made ready to spend the night, the same fear of what Letty would do, plus a sense of middle-class manners, never let him go beyond the muttered comment: "Hasn't she got a home?" But to-night was different. To-night he was incensed beyond fear and beyond courtesy. Not only

could he and Letty never seem to be mentally alone in their house; but often they couldn't even be physically alone! He said to Letty, "Go in there and tell her to go home."

"I will not," replied Letty at once.

"If you won't, I will. I expect to have my home to myself once in a while."

Unconsciously, Letty raised her voice. "As far as I'm concerned, you can have your old home to yourself—all to yourself—for ever and ever."

Grace now appeared between the curtains of the alcove. She had put on Letty's dressing gown and looked from one to the other, pale, with large, disturbed eyes. She had caught Letty's last words; still she never thought that the quarrel could include her. Only, she was sorry for both of them.

"We think you'd better go home to-night," said Harold.

She was so taken aback that her cheeks grew quite white and haggard, her eyes turned toward him with a dark, welling pathos. Harold moved his own eyes quickly.

"Don't mind a thing he says," cried Letty. "Don't go home. I want you to stay."

"No. I'd better go."

She walked, white-faced, into the alcove, followed by Letty. Her shadow had been pulled up short and she was, for the moment, stunned by the comprehension of what this might mean to her.

CHAPTER NINE

WHEN Grace had not seen Letty for a fortnight, her mind began to weave in and about various stratagems. She knew she would make her way back to their house—she had to—but her life, especially of late, had been so based on substrata of manipulation that it never occurred to her to do this directly. At last she hit on a plan which included Anita Vestry. The latter was not so much associated with her as to draw Harold's instant suspicion; besides, Letty, in Harold's hearing, had asked the girl to come and see her.

One noon she made a special trip downtown to have lunch with Anita, to confide in her and to broach to her the idea of calling up Letty and inviting her to the theater. Grace would get them free tickets and would meet them.

"I really want to see her ever so much," Grace

pleaded. "Of course, I call her up, but it's not the same. Harold plays bridge to-morrow so, if he *knows* she's going with you, it'll be all right.

Anita couldn't understand. "Why don't you just call her up and meet her downtown yourself?"

"No," said Grace, "I want her to have a perfect alibi. If you call up at dinner time Harold will answer the phone and he'll know *you* are making the arrangements, and he'll be satisfied. They fight so much about everything, I don't want them to fight over me. Besides, I'd like to have you along."

This was not an afterthought. There was an uncommon stability, a fresh sturdiness about Anita, which was new to Grace and which attracted her. All her other relations—at home, with Blake, at the office; even, now, with Letty—seemed so precarious that she was nearly always in a state of inner fear—an apprehensive shivering of her very soul. She longed for solid, utterly smooth ground, and Anita gave promise of this.

By some maneuver Grace had managed to get two pairs of seats, so Letty and Grace sat together, and Anita sat behind them by herself. She enjoyed it that way. She luxuriated in the vacant seat.

"If I am ever rich," she thought, "I will always buy three seats to the theater; one for me and a vacant one on either side."

A fig for talk of selfishness when, for the price of selfishness, one could buy some freedom from too enveloping human contacts! But probably she would never be rich. The play was poor, even Anita, who merely liked to watch the lights and the faces, was

forced to recognize. But the featured actress had a voice. What a voice! It made the cheapest commonplaces sound like mottoes on glorious tombs. The audience was aquiver with her voice.

During the first intermission Anita remarked on it to Grace.

"Yes," said Grace with a grave note of opinion, "I think so, too. I think they're—silly not to star her."

"Imagine her as Juliet!" suggested Letty.

"N-no. She's not helpless enough. I don't feel that a Juliet—would have so much poise. But Candida! Blake and I are mad about Shaw and we decided that she'd make the perfect Candida. I told Dexter I wanted to meet her, and if he can arrange it I'd like to tell her that."

Somehow, Anita had never realized that actresses could be met. The idea struck her very suddenly and she looked at Grace, in spite of herself, with wonder that had a tinge of awe in it. Anita would not quite have dared to cry as Letty did, "Oh, will you take me along, Grace?"

"If it's—possible," said Grace with dignity.

During the second intermission Grace and Letty held a long, vigorous consultation on clothes. Anita, listening, could not understand why they had troubled to trick and to arrange this evening for such talk. She could not feel the warm alliance between them from which each drew comfort and composure, no matter what they said. From each other they got that sense of the burden of troubles, emotions, and thoughts being eased, shared; of some other helping to live their

lives which men may hope to freely get from women, but which wise women never even attempt to expect from men. To be sure, men can have their easy, unexacting, open friendships, and laugh at the intricate intimacies between women, for it is upon the shoulders of women that they unload the subtler moods and cares. But this lack in their lives women must look to other women to fill, unless they can bear to be, too often, entirely alone.

After the theater the three girls walked up Broadway, past the first rush and chatter of the crowds, the first battle of lights and electric signs, past the kitten made of light naïvely chasing a spool made of light, to a slightly quieter section before another turn of that twisting, glinting street, opening and shutting accordion-like. They went into Bouton's and sat down at a blackly shining, glassy table.

"Three frŏsted chŏcolates," ordered Grace.

"Three frawsted chawc'lets?" inquired the waiter politely.

They began to giggle behind his back.

"It's always that way," said Grace. "I've tried every combination but I never hit on the right one. If I say 'frawsted chŏcolate,' the waiter rebukes me with 'frŏsted chawc'let.' And if I reverse the pronunciation, he reverses it, too, so we never meet."

They were merry, but both Grace and Letty glanced at the clock from time to time. Letty said in a low aside under cover of the general hubbub, "Are you going up with me?"

"No, to Brooklyn," murmured Grace. She gave the

faintest nod in Anita's direction. Anita was not meant to catch the nod.

Grace looked up at her swiftly across the table.

"How is your job going now?" asked Anita.

"Oh, so-so. Al has a movie. I've been working all day with a vaudeville act. Midgets. I had an awfully bright idea—if I say so myself. Eight of them—piled into a cab and then refused to pay extra fare, claiming they were so small that eight of them made only four legal persons. So the driver—haled them to court. He was marvelous—we had to let him in on it, of course—fell right into the spirit of the thing and was very—indignant, and postured and declaimed like anything. I love taxi drivers. They always catch the spirit of things. But we had to let the judge in, too, so he would dismiss the case before the afternoon show and that—was difficult. Harry fixed that up. We've got a tremendous spread in the *Evening World* to-night—it's just their meat—and stuff in all the other papers. Very funny.

"But none of it's—easy," she explained with more emphatic pauses and doubly serious eyes. "It's not like doing publicity for an established theatrical firm. They're—entitled to a certain amount of space in the dramatic columns. They have standing and they advertise. Harry Strauss places advertising for his clients, too, but not everywhere and not *enough* and not—consistently. Besides, the papers are wary of him into the bargain. So it's a process of grab as grab can. And he certainly expects you to grab. He wants all the news space and all the front pages!"

"I have a singer, too," she added with a snigger. "Baritone. I think I've—acquired him, Letty. Two lunches and one dinner so far, and he wants to teach me how to speak Italian and eat spaghetti. Pretty good—what? We're also going to have a show soon—called *Mamie*—and I think perhaps Mr. Strauss'll let me handle it alone. If I do well perhaps I'll even get—a raise. Do you know, Annabella told me she paid Strauss $200 a week, and I don't know what the night club paid him. It's unbelievable, isn't it? He gets the highest prices in the business."

"I'll bet Blake minds the baritone," put in Letty.

"Minds? I guess he doesn't," said Grace firmly. She seemed altogether less flexible than Anita had ever seen her. Her eyes were merely large eyes, very calm. "I guess—he has no right to mind. I must find some way to spend my evenings."

There was one thing more that Letty wished to know, and as they were leaving, single file, she murmured to Grace, "Then when is she coming back?"

"Not till December," said Grace, low. "She changed her mind and wanted to come home for Thanksgiving but—she was told to *stay*. If Ma should call . . ."

"I know. Don't worry."

Some time later, when Anita was preparing for bed, the two asides, the conversation she had overheard at the night club, the slight warning nod began to arrange themselves idly in her mind. And, not of her volition, but like the final link of a puzzle slipping into place without effort when all the other parts have been set in order, there came back to her a remark Grace

had made at their one dinner together. Blake lived in Brooklyn.

With a certain gallantry, she at once shook off this unexpected meaning, a meaning that seemed too discordant in the atmosphere of the tragic which she had sensed about Grace; a meaning which left a wryness in her mouth and opened before her mind a shocking vista of sad, small, endless, and tasteless adaptations ever at their task of leveling and making endurable. After all, what did she know of tragedy? It suddenly struck her that perhaps the very souls in hell found obscure dingy ways of habituating themselves to hell fire and thereafter survived in the midst of it with an unseemly equanimity.

CHAPTER TEN

DURING the last two years of school Grace had taken her classes at the Washington Square College. Between classes, which came in the late afternoon and evening, she would cross Washington Square Park and explore the raggedy-taggedy streets of the Italian and artistic colonies. Sometimes she went to the tea-room cafés that brought together art and tourists. When she met Blake Andrews in one of these (very formally, they were introduced) she met an even-featured young man with sandy hair, a solid chin, and thin cheeks. He slouched with determination, did not trouble to be polite, and did not trouble to be neat. The acidity of failure she mistook and he mistook for the irony of sophistication. He talked about books, plays, and the stage. So did she. He was married, which was too bad,

but not definitely against him in our times, and his wife remained in St. Louis, which was better. He led a curious life.

This life seemed strange even to Blake, though he acted as if he had been born to it. His people were decent, semi-substantial folks in St. Louis. He had married, as Grace said, the "little girl next door," a pretty girl, whose porch and lawn adjoined, who had gone to the same college, who was gentle and dutiful and knew how to cook. No one had forced him to marry her. No one had forced him to enter a relative's bank. There he had done his work equably and capably and was in line for a vice-presidency, at least. He and Edith, his wife, had an apartment, not a house like their parents', with all sorts of novel appliances. They were a modern young couple. When the war began Blake enlisted at once, and after his discharge he stayed in New York. He said that he wished to write plays.

Blake came not too unnaturally by an interest in the theater. An uncle was on the stage—on the road, rather, but with headquarters in New York; the aunt, too, was of the profession. They lived in a two-room apartment over a restaurant on West Forty-seventh Street. There Blake took up his abode. At one end of the street burlesque chorus girls with fat legs stood about the stage door of the Columbia; opposite, agents and vaudeville actors greeted each other warmly around the Palace. In the center of the block Spaniards leaned against the portals of the Hotel America, contemplating with dumb, warm eyes and chewing toothpicks. The

porter constantly moved trunks with vivid placards. Actors and fight managers were shaved by the window of the Hotel Somerset. Highly painted, ardently respectable women, with wedding rings, divorces, fur coats, and diamonds of various grades, walked in and out of the delicatessen shops, lingerie shops, restaurants, lobbies, and the few remaining brownstone houses. Lap dogs were aired before shabby apartment hotels and trucks of scenery unloaded before the climbing iron staircase back of the Palace.

At first Blake hunted for work. As he disliked the only sort of work he knew and was not familiar with any other, he found no work. He looked up various people from St. Louis, made acquaintance with Broadway, and for a time he drifted toward the Village. His struggles had served no purpose, so he made up his mind with a vigor none the less effective for being inert, to struggle no more. He would not go home. He did no work. He even stopped shaving and paid no further attention to his clothes. His parents sent him a little money and not too many remonstrances; he was their only child and they swore by him—perhaps they remembered his firm chin and unwavering gait. His wife stayed with her people and wrote him bewildered, pleading letters. His uncle provided food and shelter. Blake went about, unshaven, thin-cheeked, morose, not confiding in anyone.

He was, as one Village girl defined it, in the "sitting business." Whenever she entered a Village café and saw him there, sitting sourly in a corner, she called, "Ah, there! Still in the sitting business, what?" Blake

was outsitting his parents, his job, his duty, his class, and St. Louis, Missouri. He even had a faint hope that he might outsit his wife, a faint hope since Blake came of a social stratum in which it is one of the virtues of wives to stick like a wet hair to the hand. To prove, however, that he had at least outsat this virtue in himself, he made some careless love to girls who painted or wrote and thereby, necessarily to Blake, flaunted their lack of cohesion. For several months he and Grace met thus, very casually, enjoying the novelty of each other's "lines."

One day they were walking up Sixth Avenue when a shabby man approached Blake and asked him for money to buy a meal. Blake had a quarter in his pocket. The sight of pain, trouble of any sort, was hateful to him, for, affected by it though he was, he found himself averse with every fiber of his lethargic, self-contained nature to any effort at alleviation. He thought he had decided that such effort was futile. He could not help other people's troubles; therefore he wished to be unconscious of them. They made him feel too powerless. He put his hand into his pocket, because of Grace, and at once thought better of it. He didn't mean to be confused by gallantry. The man added, "I been in vaudeville for years, mister, and now I can't get work." Blake walked by with an awkward laugh. "Oh, in vaudeville?" he said. "Then you're not worth even a quarter. Apply to the N. V. A." He flushed, as he said this, at his own brutality.

Grace hurried past him, caught up with the man, and searched for some change. She was white-lipped and had

difficulty to keep back the tears. She did not think she could even bear Blake by her side.

Blake had a stroke of luck that year. He wrote a playlet with another man who knew an agent who sold it as a vaudeville act. Toward the end of the year Edith managed to get the money to come to New York, their furniture was brought from St. Louis, and Blake found himself in the midst of his lares and penates in Brooklyn, with a vague income, a tender if puzzled wife, and a love affair accelerated by its own speed, going now of its own volition.

At last neither Grace nor Blake could make any further attempts to fly before the fire with which they had been playing. They merely sought, with a muddled stubbornness on Blake's part, to keep the flames away from that parched island where Edith dwelt, bewildered, but not even imagining, utterly unknowing. Their hope, at least Blake's hope, was that some day the island would grow too parched for human endurance and Edith would cease to forgive and to submit and by herself, of her own free will, try to escape. To cast her out from even this poor refuge to which she clung so intently seemed impossible to Blake. He could not be so cruel to her. And Grace, resenting this division between his love and his kindness, this division which was so nicely defined for her, which Blake could not, would not, realize, saw no way but to yield. She wished for both the love and the kindness; she would not rest and could not feel serene till she had both. But for the present, for the sake of peace, she had made her choice. There was a rough justice in it, a painful justice. She

would have the love and Edith might, undisturbed for the present, have the kindness.

Blake, walking up Broadway on a January afternoon, was full of a new, a dreaded necessity for kindness which he had had to swallow and which now Grace would have to swallow or reject. He had a reason which caused his memory to stumble back through the passage of the months, past various milestones which he had never considered before but which he found he recollected surprisingly well. He had a good memory which he kept to himself. The urging and the pleading were blurred because they had been so distasteful, but it was not so with a certain promise that he had made to Grace, all the circumstances of which appeared to him with a double distinctness. He understood why he had made the promise and why the promise had been called for. He understood also why he had broken the promise. And how was he to explain it? He could shift the blame and he could not shift the blame at all honorably. He had a defense and yet, before accusing eyes, it crumbled into no defense at all. He could not help remembering the dark glare of those eyes, whose suction was, more often than he cared to admit, a source of wonder to him, focused on him as Grace said, in all tense seriousness, "If that ever happened, I—I would kill you. I would."

And yet, what had he to blame himself for? Who had made the choice if not Grace, while he kept himself consciously aloof, while, unconsciously, how could he help that he had willed to aid the choice? He could not bear to see the tangle, wished with all his heart to turn

his head and avoid it, as one avoids the ugly sight of some mangled animal by the wayside, but he found it, with loathing, with embarrassment and dismay, impossible, for he was within the snarl, he was part of the mangled animal.

Even when he did not wish to see Grace, when what he had to say would be much better said by letter, by written word, not face to face, those eyes were steadily drawing him through the traffic, up Broadway, around that special corner, and nearer, ever nearer, to her. He had never before quite guessed how many arid spaces there were in his life and how, from Grace's eyes, like deep, pliant pools, he drew their constant and necessary refreshment.

He found her already sitting at their table. She wore an almost springlike hat of pale silk, for it was one of those winter days which give promises of spring that cannot possibly be kept. This day had succeeded only in losing all its red corpuscles and was wan, languid, dampish.

The hat shaded her eyes. To gain time he commented on it.

"Have you got your raise, then?" he asked, and Grace seemed surprised. It was usually she who made the first allusions to her work. Seeing him so concerned, however, she described a hopeful interview with Harry Strauss and told him news of *Mamie.*

"Only, I thought he'd let me handle it myself, and now Al is in on it, too, which makes things—very annoying. I feel as if I have to be on my guard," she said disconsolately.

"Mm. He would cut throats all right."

"I don't understand that—sort of throat cutting," said Grace. "If I were in his way—but I'm not at all. I have a feeling he thinks Harry Strauss is grooming me, sort of, to take his place, at less money. But that's silly, if Al really has an interest in the business, as he says."

Blake thought, but had no advice to offer. The subject tired him on the whole. He did not see why Grace could not do her work on the surface, day by day, without peering and boring into underground channels, like a woman. Besides, he was too unhappy and could not bear his unhappiness alone and did not see how he could find the way to make her share it. Why didn't she see, of herself?

Grace watched him under her new hat with dark, unlighted eyes. Something was wrong between them to-day, and to-day she felt too weary herself to make the effort to set it right. She ventured one usual question, but without verve or hope.

"Everything—as usual?"

Now was the way opened. He glanced up with a sense of relief and saw by Grace's posture, her eyes drooping over the table, the answer she wished to-day. He nodded quickly. So that subject was closed. Their tea dragged on.

Then, putting on her gloves, Grace said, "I have to dash to the photographer's before he closes. Will I see you to-morrow?"

He nodded again, resigning himself with resentment to another day's sole confusion and apprehensive thought, and walked on to pay the check.

Grace could not, however, leave him yet. She stood by the door. "I thought you might—walk up with me," she said, and glued her eyes to him to see whether this was a mistake. He did not take her arm but they walked on together.

Suddenly he had such a longing to rid himself of his burden of suspense, even of anguish, that he wanted to halt in the middle of the street and cry, "Look here, don't walk with me. I—my wife and I—we're going to have a child," and have done with it and breathe while he waited to see what would follow. His feet even paused for a second, then he clutched her arm and pulled her on. Grace turned to him her questioning eyes, just beginning to fear, saying nothing.

"Do you remember what you said—that you'd kill me—if——?" he said swiftly. The memory rose at once to the surface of Grace's eyes. "Well, you can do it now," he said, with a sneer at his pain and her pain, and turned his face away.

She understood, but the understanding would not rise and surge within her as easily as the memory had. She nodded her head several times slowly, to make sure she knew, taking some slow breaths, making the first minor inward adjustments quickly, quickly, holding back terror, hugging hope fiercely, as people do who see the overwhelming flood on the horizon. When she spoke her voice was calm though strained, as if she called for news across a slight distance. She asked him how it had happened. This he told her shortly, for this at least he owed her. And when the baby was coming.

This he hadn't asked and did not care to know himself. It was a long way off.

They went on.

"It'll be sort of hard on you—I mean financially," she remarked. He hardly dared to listen.

They went on.

"Babies are very expensive," she said in the same level voice.

After a while, something less than a sound, the feeling behind a sound, moved him to look at her again. They walked on a street of endless garages. Between the brim of the new hat and the collar of her coat she was weeping openly, without noise. When she noticed his eyes on her she bent her head completely away, almost back, and fumbled from far off in her purse for a handkerchief.

"Oh, I forgot," she said with bitterness. "I mustn't cry. You don't like that." This bitterness, this first and only bitterness, she would permit herself.

Without thinking how or why any longer, they stopped in the middle of the street and Blake found and clung to her hand. He looked so white, so thin-faced, so stern. He hated to use the words of tenderness and gazed at the pavement, clinging to her hand.

"When you don't cry any more, Grace, I'll know that you don't care any more."

Their fingers clutched at each other's, intertwined tightly. He, hugging his misery, could not think of her own. She, comforting him, let it go till she should be alone. It would keep, never fear, it would keep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE photographer said that she would have to wait for the pictures.

He said, "Make yourself comfortable."

She heard him finally and sat down.

It was not the child itself that mattered—that there would be a child. It was not the betrayal that mattered, the infidelity with the other woman, the wife, the very woman against whom she had particularly to be on guard, the very woman against whom he had promised himself to be on guard. No. That was an entirely physical betrayal, the circumstances of which he had explained, and which, no matter how she might revolt against them, she could not help but understand. But such waves of outrage, of hatred, of envy, of misery, of she knew not what, stormed through her that she

was bent double with them in her chair. She bit her lips tightly to contain them and buried her face in her coat collar. No part of it was visible but a white speck of cheek and huge, dark eyes.

Back of her mind there had been a vague feeling, a vague wish, scarcely credible and certainly not possible, for a child, one particular child, Blake's child. Why? She had no interest in and no sentiment about children, "the little brats!" And now through a trick (pleading, crying that he no longer loved her; being above all, so near, so close, so *there*), through a trap, planned and intended, no matter how desperately planned and how pitifully intended, the other woman would have the child.

With what passionate vanity Nature works first in some women in the matter of having a child! Many a woman's first thought is to bear a child by a man she loves not because, as the saying goes, she wants his child, not because she wants any child, but because ecstasy is so unimaginable when in the course of time it has fled; because it is so impossible to articulate, translate into words as a keepsake, that she wants the child as a not-to-be-belied, an actual, factual reminder. A "pledge of love"—no, not that—but a child is a pledge to remember, so that passion can never wholly be buried under mounds of time and two look at each other and wonder with their brains, their senses having entirely lost the responses, and try to recollect and not really believe. When the memory wavers and the body is quite oblivious, the child remains to certify the old emotion to the groping mind.

Thus her agony surged through Grace and her jealousy clamored within her. If she quarreled with Blake to-morrow and went years without seeing him, soon, in a short time, their love would be lost from their minds; they could meet and talk and wonder and try to recall and it would be like trying to remember yesterday's sunsets or dawns seen long ago. But Edith, she, this other woman and this unloved woman, she would have the child, the living proof, something which she and Blake could grasp through the miasmas of long afterward—the common memory, through whose body, formed by their bodies, they could reach back and forever after not wholly deny.

She had a long time to wait for the pictures. A twilight, faintly violet, just stroked the windows, like a gentle hand. Behind a screen the photographer and his assistants were busy, doing something, drying the prints, and they talked and joked. Now and then one of the men would come out and use the telephone. One boy called the same number twice. The last time he said softly, quickly, "I'm tied up here, baby. Be up soon." He was tall and had a smug, wooden face. Grace looked him over with cold eyes and decided that he was a dull young man. A very dull young man. She disliked him at sight, nay, she hated him and all these satisfied, foolish dolts of photographers. She was shivering in her chair, her hands shook so that she clasped them, her very teeth chattered.

The photographer came over and said with concern, "Are you cold?" and poured her a drink of Scotch. It was powerful, vivid stuff and now made her shiver with

its heat instead of with her cold. What was it someone had said about telephones—was it Blake? Oh, yes. Something about its being love that kept the wires busy and the company prosperous, something about the long lines of booths in the late afternoons being forever filled with men calling their wives and lovers calling their sweethearts. Something about a soulless corporation hiring hordes of operators and engineers and linemen, keeping great experimental stations for the purpose of expediting the course of love over the wires, paying fat dividends because Tom and Mary were enabled to hear each other's voices and smile and quarrel within a few seconds. Funny idea.

If those pictures weren't ready soon she wouldn't be able to stand it; she would have to get out, do something, do anything. That last thought made a sort of shriek in her. She rose from her chair. If she could walk, now, up and down; but that was not possible here. She sat down again, stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth and bit it. She would like to tear it, to tear something! Limb from limb. Yes, that was a very satisfactory description of a rending. To tear limb from limb.

"Here you are," said the photographer. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

She took the folder. She almost wished to make a bow to him. She inclined her head, anyhow, and said sweetly out of her white face, "Thank you so much."

What had Harold once remarked in an unguarded moment of sympathy with her? "Go out and walk. That helps." Walk. This miserable sky on this miserable

day would not even darken but grew weirdly lighter, faded against the upspringing lights, grew yearning, grew wan. As she walked, she shuddered horribly with cold and felt herself flushing, red-hot, with the liquor. When she put a hand to her face the heat of her cheek amazed her and the cold of her hand was deathly.

At that special point in her misery a bus appeared and made her look about. She was on Fifth Avenue. The bus passed and stopped and took its place in her sorrow, like a hearse. Always thereafter it kept its place there, like a hearse. Whenever she remembered, she looked about and found herself all at once on Fifth Avenue, she watched the bus pass, black with people, and halt.

She saw in a moment of saving reality that she was near the street where Anita Vestry lived. When the moment fled it merely left her wondering when she had seen Anita last. She couldn't think. Not at the opening of *Mamie*. No. Even Letty had not come to the opening. And then she had a flash of acute brilliance, like a stroke of lightning. The whole world grew electrically light with it. Why, she could run to see Letty! No. Harold would be there. Harold would learn, but to-night she really could not have him know, to-night she could not have him see her white and trembling. He would think—she would see it in his face—that it was too bad but what did Grace expect? She had only reached what her road would lead her to. She paused before a shop window, pinning her eyes to coats and hats, trying to pin her mind to some object with

the same intentness. Then, as fast as she could, almost running, running away from the solitary prison of misery, battling to escape it, she sped in the direction of Anita's room.

Fortunately, Anita had not yet gone to dinner. She was lying on the bed in a tiny room which held, besides, a small dressing table, an old rocker, and a bit of matting. She was resting, feeling bored, and she greeted Grace with pleasure. Since the opening of *Mamie* she and Grace had met just once at the office. Anita noticed that Grace hugged her coat about her and looked very white, that Grace clasped her hands tightly, and she asked in surprise, "Is it very cold out, now?"

Grace made no reply. In fact, now that she was here, she didn't know what she wanted to do or what to say, yet she did not want to go away either. She glanced around the room. She had seen it once before; it told her the same story. It was very bare. At last she roused herself and remembered a dim duty.

"Will you do something for me?" she said to Anita hurriedly. "Will you call up my mother and tell her I won't be home for dinner? I have to look in on *Mamie*."

After a few moments Anita replied in some astonishment that she would. She saw now that Grace was in trouble, what or how she could not imagine, and remained silent. Grace went over to the dressing table and took off her hat. But she did nothing, merely looked at herself in the mirror with vague eyes and turned away. She rearranged her hat.

"Have you had your dinner?" said Anita gently.

Grace made a gesture of distaste. "I'm not hungry." Then she seemed to try with determination for composure and added, "I'll go with you if you like."

"There's a tea room downstairs," said Anita. She felt that Grace would not, could not, walk outside.

Grace ordered coffee and sat, turned a little sideways from Anita, pulling her coat collar up about her face. The sight of Anita eating made her almost sick. Once Anita asked, because it seemed that she should, "Aren't you feeling well?" Grace shook her head.

Then Anita decided that she had better not notice. They were alone in the tea room, but the service was slow and they sat there a long time, a painful time. Anita sighed with relief when it was over, thinking that now she would be allowed to go back to the room which had seemed too empty before, which seemed overwhelmingly serene now. But Grace took her arm as they went out and begged, "Will you walk over to *Mamie* with me? You may have to stand, they're selling out, but you won't mind, will you? Really, it's an awfully good show."

In Grace's apparent state it would have been brutal to refuse. They walked across town to *Mamie*. Here Grace began to regain her poise. Though still white, she was businesslike, and Anita admired the calm, pleasant way in which she talked to the house manager, exchanged a few words with the box-office man, nodded to the ticket taker, and arranged for Anita to have one vacant seat in the back row. Grace stood behind her and viewed the theater with the professional interest of

an habitué. She remarked to Anita that she was learning to "count up" the house. Throughout the first act Grace remained in the rear, and whenever Anita glanced around she was quiet and cool, with her eyes on the stage.

The show was pretty, the dancing good, the music gay and sweet, and Anita felt how comfortable it was to sit at ease and watch the enactment of passions lightly, certain of happy fulfillment, on a stage. She thought musical comedies very jolly and liked the lack of strain with which they translated easy emotions to the audience, easy sentiment—too sentimental because it was so easy. But what a lot of trouble that saved the audience! All it had to do was to watch the dancers and be gay; to hum one of the popular love songs and to be in love.

During the intermission Grace asked her whether she wanted to go back stage. "I must have a few words with the handsome hero, and see if I can get a Sunday story out of him," she said, haggard under the yellow lights, but quite self-possessed. Anita, however, felt too awkward to meet a hero as handsome as this one. She refused.

The house grew dark again. Some players appeared and pulled together strands of a cloying plot. When they danced they were graceful, when they sang they were soothing, but as soon as they opened their mouths in the spoken word they became vulgar. And what spoken words they uttered! Anita could not help writhing. She watched the people around her with wonder that they should remain unaffected.

Then a man half-sang, half-declaimed a mammy song. He bent over the footlights, he stretched out his arms, he made acrobatic sallies almost into the audience, all with a hideous vigor and a violent, an infuriatingly forceful, banality. Anita felt that she could not bear it any longer. It did not relieve her to grit her teeth, to grimace, or to glare at the concentrated faces about her. The whole theater stank for her with this cheap sentiment, like cheap perfume. She got up and disturbed half a row, stumbling over legs, braving angry looks and impatient mumbles, beating her way out. Grace now stood by one of the exits, in shadow.

Anita said, "Whew! I'm sorry, but I *must* get out, I can't stand this."

With unexpected sympathy, Grace whispered, "Yes, it is pretty awful. Yes, let's go."

The outside air was damp and heavy but at least odorless. They wavered on a street corner. Then Anita saw that Grace was shuddering, that she was no longer cool, that the skin under her eyes and on her cheeks was drawn and yellow, and she asked again, "Are you sick?"

"I don't feel well at all," said Grace with difficulty. "Will you ride home with me—please do. I'll take a taxi."

Grace huddled into one corner and Anita sat in the other. A black length of seat separated them. From time to time a light shone full on Grace and Anita saw her clasping her hands with a handkerchief between, her eyes huge and fixed on nothing. Anita held the silence. Soon Grace rapped on the window and told the driver to take them through the park. Anita

did not know enough about New York to understand that Grace was postponing her arrival home as long as possible.

Sadly the park wove and unwove before them; the poor bare trees in the wistful air, the bulky clouds overhead, the big mists of houses around the farthest edges, the cheer of the electric baubles of lights subdued. In the midst of it, Anita, sighing, glanced at Grace again and saw a tear rolling evenly down one long cheek. She was frightened and lowered her eyes quickly so that she would not see, but she could not help murmuring, making one last attempt, "Can I do anything for you?"

Grace was so long with her answer that Anita decided she would not reply and settled back into the silence. She breathed heavily rather than sighed, and suddenly Grace replied in a cool voice that did not match the tear, "No. Blake's wife is having a baby. She thought—it would bring them together."

So that was it. But Anita was far from full realization. She was merely bewildered—and embarrassed. She moved closer to her side of the taxi and frowned, careful to stare out of the window.

In a very small voice, she said at last, "Oh."

Now they were reaching the end of the park. The lights already anticipated the beginning of great apartment houses and curtained, glowing windows. And, as if she were taking advantage of the last moment of confidential sadness and darkness, Grace turned to Anita, raised her head as if in challenge, and said, "I'm living with him. I suppose you know." Her lips curled in a

sneer, a hard, grim sneer like a blow, as she peered into Anita's face.

But in Anita's face she saw neither sympathy nor comprehension nor blame, only the stupid, startled expression of a person stepping off into water almost beyond one's depth. Anita's mouth was actually open a little way. So she had guessed correctly that night! But she did not want to know; she would not know; she was frantic with an awed embarrassment. After a time she said again, in a very scared voice, "Oh."

This seemed so inane even to her that she hunted about wretchedly for some more suitable comment. Finally she breathed, "I'm sorry," without looking at Grace, and felt more scared than ever. She wasn't sorry, not at the moment; she wasn't not sorry. She wasn't anything. She wanted to open the taxi door and fly. Grace said nothing further.

Once in a while Anita stole a glance at her and saw her sitting there, huddled, with big eyes in a thin face, twisting her handkerchief tight enough to tear it, twisting and tearing with fingers like teeth. She herself kept very quiet, hardly taking breath so as not to disturb the dim compassion that rose like a mist between them and embraced them and held them both, wordless, in her shadowy arms.

Book II

THE BALANCE OF POWER

CHAPTER ONE

ANITA used to have an instinct to make herself very small and very blank when she first visited Grace's house. She was such a weird phenomenon to Mrs. Kline. Rack her mind as Mrs. Kline would, and she often would, staring at Anita out of her round blue eyes, a little bloodshot, shaking her head almost imperceptibly from time to time, she could not remember anyone in her experience who had not come to New York to, at least at first, stay with relatives. This younger generation that one read about in the papers! But even Mrs. Kline, whose imagination on some points was lascivious enough to bring the blush to Grace's cheek, offered no hints about Anita.

"You're plain-spoken, Anita," Mrs. Kline would say to her after she had decided to approve of her and to

permit her to cultivate a friendship with Grace which was already thriving. "Just like me. That's what I like in a person. You wouldn't hide anything, least of all from your mother, would you?"

Grace would retaliate to Anita with some remark meant for her mother. And thus Anita would sit at table, feeling like a ghost, while both spoke through her person, that obviously was only a little less intangible to Grace than to Mrs. Kline. And yet Anita came to the house more and more often, partly because of her own isolation, partly because of Grace's soft reaching toward her. All these months Grace had been to her simple, sad, clinging, and obliging. When, through some mood of her own, Anita sent an occasional rebuff, Grace accepted in silence, seemed to understand, forgot it. Each discovered certain ideas in the other that no longer needed to be solitary. When Anita wished to dislike Mr. Milford articulately, Grace listened; with her Grace mulled over ways out. Grace offered suggestions for a mitigation of loneliness which made Anita grateful though they were suggestions which would suit Grace's temperament and which were highly inapplicable for Anita. In turn, Anita, modest though she was and not altogether naïve, considered that the reason for Grace's friendliness could only be that Grace liked her. She was not of the least importance, she thought, and there was nothing of the least importance she had to offer anyone. And though, when Mrs. Kline, who was not subtle, showed a patronizing concurrence in this opinion, Anita might feel humiliated, she was not exactly hurt. She liked to watch Mrs. Kline and she liked to

watch Grace. Long ago she had formed the habit of focusing her observations and her interest outside of herself on things which she humbly granted were more exciting.

Even when in a burst of final, desperate irritation she threw up her job with the *Dress Daily,* she did not deceive herself that the event, disastrous enough in her life, would cause much of a ripple when narrated in the Kline household. Blake's baby had been born and nothing could vie with that in Grace's mind. Anita would not bother to inform her. She lay about her room for a few days moping, thinking, till Grace sent a wire after her. Grace had a cold. Would Anita come up to see her and explain what had happened?

Mrs. Kline opened the door for her and at once began in her jarring voice a discourse on a dress that Anita had spoken of ordering.

"I'm not busy now, Anita; I could even buy the goods for you at a discount, and I'd make it up for you very cheap. Don't be afraid, I'd keep everything down for you like for my own child. You better speak up if you want it because soon I won't have the time."

Anita said shortly that it was out of the question as she had lost her job. She did not expect Mrs. Kline to be affected. But Mrs. Kline was—in a different sense.

"Grace never told me a word," she cried in consternation. "She *never* tells me a word." She tramped along with Anita up the hall to the small sewing room where Grace lay on a couch. "You never told me that Anita here lost her job," she shouted accusingly.

Grace looked out of wide, patient eyes and did not

answer. The telephone, which the Klines kept in the sewing room, had been moved to the floor within reach of her hand.

"Don't you worry, Anita," cried Mrs. Kline, putting an arm about her. "There's plenty jobs around. If you want me to make that dress you know I could make it up for you and you don't have to pay me right away, you don't have to pay me till you like. And if God forbid anything should happen, you know you can always come up here with Grace and me." She patted Anita's shoulder, regarding Grace with an air of challenge. Then, with an effort, she added, "Now I guess you girls want to be left to yourself. I guess you have *things* to talk about," she said heavily, "you don't think *I'm* smart enough to hear. In my day, girls weren't too smart for their mothers, but nowadays they are and we mothers got to make the best of it." She lingered. Both girls kept still.

After she had straightened whatever in the room could be straightened and otherwise delayed her departure, Mrs. Kline had at last no choice but to keep her promise. She banged the door to, anyhow, as a slight expression of her feelings. A shudder passed through Grace; she placed a quick finger on her lip, signing silence to Anita. And, to be sure, there was a certain interval of time between the closing of the door and the retreating *clamp clash* of Mrs. Kline's feet.

"Anyhow, it's kind of her," murmured Anita.

"Yes," said Grace. "She means it, too, and she'd remember any kindness she did you to the bitter end."

As she lay staring at the ceiling, the telephone rang.

She answered it in a low, cautious voice. She named no names, every word was noncommittal, a series of "ohs," one "better," some "yeses" and at length a phrase which Anita had heard from Grace before and which always made her smile with its unjustified consequence: "Well —what are—your plans?" Anita reflected that, while highly diplomatic, while perhaps necessary for secrecy, such conversations must provide a further diet of exasperation for Mrs. Kline.

She could not help noticing, too, how Grace had marshaled her illness, as it were; had arranged it, dramatized it. When Anita was sick she did not think how she looked or what were the conditions of comfort or discomfort about her, and as for how the outside world might be affected, that naturally never entered her mind. She was ill and paid as little heed to her illness as possible and wished to hide and get it over with. But Grace had dressed her hair as best became a sick person, very simply, brushed back from her nicely balanced smooth forehead and clasped with a barrette. Her dressing-gown had that fine symmetry, settled about her as evenly, as gracefully, as her clothes always did. There was a small atomizer on the table and a new book. The telephone rang. Grace's friends had apparently been informed or took the trouble to inform themselves. There was even a vase of red roses. Grace saw her looking at them.

"My baritone sent them," Grace said with her deep snigger. "It seems his heart is like a red, red rose. But tell me what happened."

When Anita began her story under Grace's atten-

tive eyes she found that even less had happened than she supposed. She was so annoyed by Mr. Milford; she had fallen into the habit of revising his silly stories into some sort of sense, had been taxed with it, had foolishly argued—as if it mattered a whit to her—and before she knew it, she had heard herself saying, "I think I'd better leave."

Grace made only one comment. "If you *had* to leave, why didn't you get yourself fired and leave with two weeks' salary?"

Anita had never thought of this.

"You're not very good at business, are you?" said Grace, sighing. She considered. "Have you any money?"

Anita laughed.

"Then what will you do?"

Anita shrugged.

"But what will you do?" insisted Grace. "You must do something. Do you know anyone who might help you? Didn't you meet lots of people at the *Dress Daily?*"

"No one I'd ask for favors," said Anita stiffly.

Grace sighed again. "You're so proud. Pride's all right if you can afford it. But it's a question of choice. Wouldn't you rather give up a little pride—and get a job? What can you do otherwise?"

"I can go home," said Anita. "I can rest and think it over."

Grace opened her eyes. "To Trenton? Aren't you afraid?"

They understood each other, but Anita replied with a frown, "Why? My home isn't a prison."

"Well, mine is," said Grace. And suddenly she added,

"Anita, I wish you wouldn't go. I'll miss you, truly I will."

She continued softly, with many pauses, as if she were feeling her way, testing with care for a response. "You know—I thought if I could ever really leave Ma —I could if I only made a little more money—we could —take a place together—maybe."

Anita did not quite know. Anyhow, it did not bear thinking of at present. She said in haste, "Well, that's a long way off. I haven't any money, you know, and I'm not likely to have."

But she appeared to satisfy Grace, who put an arm under her head and said with assurance, "We could manage that."

"Something's up in my own job," Grace added, moving and sighing on her couch. "I don't know just what, but I can feel something. To tell the truth, I haven't been paying much attention to it lately. I guess they see it—but—I can't help it. I—there've been other things." She fell silent.

Suddenly she began the motions of her laugh and searched Anita's face. "Do you know how I got this cold?" she said. She concluded, "Looking for rooms with Blake—for his wife."

She attempted to justify herself to the expression of withdrawal on Anita's face. "I suppose that—shocks you. But it was very natural. Their place isn't big enough with the baby and *she* can't go house hunting. Blake had to—so—I took the afternoon off and accompanied him, in the rain and all."

There was a pause. She added with a curved, one-sided smile, "I hope she's grateful."

The telephone rang again and Grace was upon it almost before the ring. She used the same formula, a little lower perhaps. "Oh. . . . Oh." A deep, "*That's* good!" Then, "What are—your plans for to-morrow?"

Grace hung up. She smiled a firm, a victorious smile, pressing her lips together.

"They've named the baby James," she announced to the ceiling, smiling up at it. "After her father."

She turned upon Anita a face bereft of the smile and said grimly through her set teeth, "He isn't a junior anyway. That's *my* little victory." Her cheeks had grown haggard and after a while she felt for a handkerchief under the pillow and dabbed at her eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

EVERY day young people came to Harry Strauss's office, armed with letters, fortified with introductions, to ask for work. Grace saw them all without appearing to see; nor had it escaped her that there seemed to be more of them, that they entered more expectantly and departed more hopefully. One would have thought that she had nothing to fear. She had got her raise, she had hinted for another. But she was well aware of and knew that Harry Strauss and Al were aware of a relaxation of the tight net of effort that she had at first spread over her job. She argued with herself that this was but natural; not even race horses were expected to keep up the pace with which they started. In any case she could not help herself. All she seemed to want now was to sweep away her work somehow so as to be free to meet Blake in the afternoons.

Something was in the air, something which had spread abroad and attracted these increasing numbers of job hunters, like the mysterious word that goes forth to crows or jackals that there is a carcass for the picking. One morning Grace saw Miss MacAlister with this obscure word in her eyes, watching her. Al was very quiet this morning. He sat at their table in the outer office and mulled over photographs, destined for the women's pages, of an opera singer who had been using some reduction method. This was strange. The opera singer belonged to Grace.

As she too bent over the table, Al said to her very low, "Did you have any words with Harry?"

"No. Why?"

Al murmured, "When I call you from Harry's office, come in and *don't* shut the door. Look out, she tells him everything."

They made perfunctory motions of work. Finally Al bustled into Mr. Strauss's empty office, and as he had planned, when he called her, Grace followed as casually as possible. They stood by the window, pretending to look out of it, while Al kept an eye on Miss MacAlister and on the door.

"You know I'm your friend here," began Al with emphasis. Grace said nothing. He hurried on. "Harry was asking for you yesterday afternoon. Where were you?"

"I can't do my work and be here every minute," said Grace sharply.

"I know that. I told him so. But Harry's a funny guy. He got mad and he said, 'That girl never shows

up in the afternoon, she's never around when I want her.' I guess he was playing bridge the night before and lost a couple of dollars, so—Then he started talking about how he'd let you handle Madame Tallifer all by yourself to show what you could do—and you hadn't done so well with her, she's putting up a holler."

It was true. Grace hadn't done so well with the opera singer, Madame Tallifer. There were a thousand good reasons. There was little interest and no novelty to Madame Tallifer. She would complain in any event. But then, neither Grace nor anyone else was expected to heed reason in this business, this "racket," as Al called it. She was silent.

"So then he asked me what I thought," went on Al, "and I told him, I said, 'You know how it is, Harry. Grace hasn't got the experience you and me have. She's still learning. You got to go a little easy with her.' "

"You told him that!" exclaimed Grace. "You know very well and *he* knows too that I've done a lot better for the money he pays me——"

"I know all that, I know all that," said Al. "Sh! Listen, I had to tell him that, give him his way, you know, smooth things over. I'm your friend, see?"

Grace gave him an acute look and turned slightly away.

"Listen, think I want you to go? Wha'd'y'think I got to gain by it? It's no fun for me to break in a new girl," cried Al. "Listen, if you think I ever did or said anything against you, just ask Harry, that's all I want. Just ask him."

"Oh, let's drop it. Is that all you have to tell me?"

"Well, I was just going to finish. Just give me a chance. So a while after that Harry calls me in again and he's got a girl there. I didn't even catch her name, never heard of her, don't know her," he declared hastily, seeing Grace's eyes. "And he said to her, 'Would you work for thirty-five dollars a week?' And she said, 'Yes!' So then he said, 'Al, Miss—Whatshername—'ll be working with you next week.' "

Grace stared out of the window. After glancing at her once or twice Al began to fumble with papers on Mr. Strauss's desk. "Why don't you speak to Harry?" he suggested nervously. "Maybe you can fix things up."

But Grace shook her head and said, "No. I have to see Tallifer this morning." She picked up her coat, in passing, and went out.

Instinctively, she would not take impetuous steps across a bridge until she came to it. And she had to get out to think. This time she did not look at streets or shop windows or at the bright sky where even the clouds were a glittering, not a fluffy, white. The situation arranged itself like a chess game in her mind. Al wished to get rid of her. This girl was a friend perhaps. Or Al was afraid that she, Grace, might rise to some importance in the office. Well, she had never trusted Al. Just the same, he was sorry for her, too, sorry that it had seemed necessary for her throat to be cut. He had for her the futile, patronizing pity of sentimental people. She need not make an enemy of him. And Mr. Strauss—he would save fifteen dollars a week. It had been a mistake to suggest another raise—no chance there at all. But, if

she knew Harry Strauss, he would not fire her (unless she begged for it) till Saturday, so that he might get the last ounce of blissfully ignorant effort out of her. Nice of Al to tell her—a small sop to his conscience perhaps —though perhaps he had planned that she would be disgusted enough and proud enough to leave pronto, of her own will, and save them the annoyance of a dismissal.

Anyhow, she had three days till Saturday. Of these she would make doubly sure by keeping out of Mr. Strauss's way. She had also an idea that she could manage to get a week's extra salary out of him by appealing to his particular vanity, which she had noted: his wistful desire of the born liar to be considered fair, square, to be believed. So she had nine working days of grace. She might not even have to tell Ma, if she began to angle at once.

She considered her problem skillfully, conscientiously, from every side, as a scientist might probe a new disease. She planned her procedure in her mind with swift instinct, a bold, logical poise, as a great general might plan a campaign. All other thoughts were excluded; ironic comparisons, the weakening, defeating insinuations of humor could not find a loophole. This was her trouble, her problem. For the time it encompassed her like the entire universe; for the time it was alone, itself, her universe; but it was a universe from which she did not shut everyone else out. No—it was rather a universe which it did not occur to her everyone else would not be pleased to share.

She had no intention of seeing Madame Tallifer. She went into a telephone booth.

Like any good general, Grace had never lost sight of her reserves. No matter how such she might be of the present, this did not prevent her from keeping herself alert for new opportunities, for ascertaining where, in an emergency, these might be more plentiful, for acquainting herself as much as possible with the people who had them to bestow. There were certain persons, too, as she realized—not perhaps entirely consciously—who, though not important themselves, might be used as keys to unlock the sources of opportunities beyond them. Mr. Milford was such a person. He could do nothing for her himself but he knew many people whose attention he could focus by means of a letter or a request. Grace was too shrewd to apply to Mr. Milford again; there were others, however, whom she had marked. Some might clamber up the rocky, direct road to strange offices and appear, scared and out of breath, to ask for work. Grace preferred the less simple, the roundabout, the easier way. She wanted a path prepared ahead of her, an entrance staged; a few laudatory wreaths strewn before, provided one's person seemed to become them, as hers did, always helped.

There was Tommy Manship, the assistant dramatic editor, who admired her, who had a job that forced press agents to pay court to him, and who could give her letters and suggestions. She arranged to see him first. Then there was her old boss, McTavish, at the Brooklyn *Press*. These were people with whom she could be frank. There were some women, too, women with money,

women with valuable "contacts," of whom she had made friends from time to time. She had not been pleasant to them definitely because of their uses. At this time she was in general pleasant and, when necessary, obliging, partly because she liked to be so. She had never needed to shrink from people. From childhood she had been accustomed to the power of soothing and softening which her looks alone had, her great eyes, the glowing clarity of her skin. She enjoyed seeing the initial receptive expression on the faces of strangers; she preferred them to retain their admiration if possible. Besides, she understood without ever being told, without ever even thinking about it, how much of comfort and success, so desired by her, rested in the hands of other people.

When she left the telephone booth her routine for that day lay clearly ahead of her.

The next morning Grace came to the office early so as to avoid both Al and Mr. Strauss. She sorted a folder of Madame Tallifer's pictures in front of the stenographer and departed with it, remarking cheerfully that she had "planted" some woman's page features. Thus she hoped to record with Miss MacAlister her happy ignorance and her absorption in Mr. Strauss's affairs. She then walked over to the studio of a writing friend of hers, made herself at home, and carefully examined her toilette. She had an appointment with a Mr. Williams at the M. A. N. Film Company.

"Drop in to tea this afternoon," said her writing friend, Diana Porter Reece. "The man who runs the Enterprise Feature Syndicate is coming. He might help you."

Diana Reece was supported chiefly by a husband but did not let this interfere with her career. She did not care whether the men in her train were useful or futile, but inevitably, among the dregs, some would emerge who were worth knowing. Grace promised to come, though she had to see Blake at tea time too. She meant to overlook neither.

The way to Mr. Williams brought memories of her first day of job hunting—how she had worried over the sealskin coat, worn too early in the season, how her mind had been in conflict between Blake and work. This last year, in which she had fought no longer, in which she had succumbed to his invasion of her mind, seemed to have had an exactly opposite effect from what she might have supposed. Her mind was like a surrendered city which the conquerors believe they have at the moment of its defeat, only, upon settlement, to find themselves absorbed by an alien, negative host. The single thought of Blake was no longer in her mind, intruding on it, harassing her to eject it. It had become part of every thought there, and so it was no longer bitterly, distinctly there, apparent at all. She could not be distracted by the idea of Blake any more than she could be distracted by the idea of herself.

She looked very well; she owned a fall coat now. She was all in brown, a clear, pale brown of hat, dress, and chiffon stockings, a velvety brown of coat and shoes. And so with the feeling of light, easy, bounding power that seems to bring success in its wake, as its due, she went in to see Mr. Williams.

When she walked out she had her job. So simply! She almost wished to snap her fingers and walked along aimlessly, smiling, letting the light blue air of Indian summer, hazy as spring but without the springlike quiver, with a faint death-weariness in it, caress her face. Mr. Williams was not like Harry Strauss. He was a tall young man with a browned face and eyes as soft as Grace's own. He was susceptible and did not attempt to hide it. "Must have been a newspaperman," thought Grace. And so easy! He had merely told her what she would do and what he could pay, and that was sixty-five dollars a week. If Harry Strauss only knew! Really she had to gloat and declare holiday.

As she had expected, at the moment of handing her her check Saturday Mr. Strauss said: "Sit down a moment, Grace. I have sad news for you." That was one point in Harry Strauss's favor, Grace thought. Whatever he might do underneath, on the surface he wasted no oily sentiment, no hypocritical blather.

He now continued: "I suppose you see things are dull now. We've got to cut down. I asked Al about you and he said the work you were doing could be done just as well by an inexperienced girl——"

"Did Al say that?" cried Grace in spite of herself. "It's very unfair of him!"

Mr. Strauss sent her a keen, comprehending look.

"Well, I asked him and that's what he said. I can't keep track of you, you know."

"It was very unfair of him," repeated Grace, flushing. "In spite of the way you divided the papers, we've

worked together on everything, as Al seemed to prefer. He can't claim any more credit for what we've done than I can."

Mr. Strauss nodded a number of times. "I know, I know all that. But that's what Al told me. If you don't agree, don't go out till Al comes and we'll have it out. Al is inclined to misrepresent things." He waited.

But a sudden idea shot through Grace's mind. Could they be working in unison? Was it a plan to get her to cut her own salary perhaps? Would people plot and counterplot with such narrow, shrewd subtlety for a few dollars? She felt highly superior to Harry Strauss and to Al. She brushed the matter aside with a curl of her lip.

"N-no," she said remotely. "I never could argue. If Al thinks that and you believe him——"

"I didn't say that, my dear," put in Harry Strauss. "I know nothing about your work. I have to ask Al and that is what he told me."

"Well, if Al feels that way about me——" She turned her eyes to the window.

"Well, what do you want to do?" said Mr. Strauss after a silence. "Do you want to leave?"

Grace lowered her eyes and took a deep breath. "Is that—the sad news you have for me?" she said in a very small voice.

"From what Al told me, I thought that would be best."

"If you're firing me," began Grace, "I have to go, of course." She spoke with dignity, but low, bowing to the greater force. She raised her eyes frankly to Mr. Strauss's

face. "I can't afford to leave," she said. "As you know, it's not so easy—to get a job. And—I have my mother to support. It's very hard on me—without any notice." Her eyes, without a hint of a tear in them, took on the deeper pathos of tears just behind.

Mr. Strauss fussed with his papers. "Well, I'll tell you," he said at length. "I want to be fair to you. I'll give you a week to look around—and keep on with your work here. At the end of the week you come in and collect your pay as usual, but that doesn't mean you're to neglect your work here, you understand. Is that fair?"

So she had won. She had what amounted to a week's much-needed vacation with pay. It would be all right with Mr. Williams since she had thoughtfully arranged with him for this interval. It was hard to hide her elation. She got up and paused by the desk.

"I hope we—part good friends," she murmured with that curious advance of her eyes and retreat of the rest of her face. "I've liked—working here, and I'm sorry that you haven't found my work—entirely—satisfactory."

"That's all right, my dear," said Mr. Strauss. "You may have been lying down on the job here of late—I only know what Al tells me—but all the same I think you're a bright girl. After you're through here, drop in now and then. I might hear of something."

She thanked him. In the corridor, she met Al on his way back to the office.

"Well?" he inquired.

"Well?" she said haughtily.

"What happened? How'd you get along with Harry?"

Grace looked him over from top to toe before she replied. "He gave me a week in which to look around."

"I'm glad he did that anyhow," cried Al. "I'll see you around here then, but I want to wish you good luck right now, Grace." He put out his hand. "If I hear of anything—you know, I'm your friend."

Grace had a sudden moment of unguarded rage. She could and would permit herself to ignore the hand. She sneered. "Yes. I know what a friend you are to me."

"Jesus Christ! What's the big idea?" cried Al. Grace went on. "Women—! Women—!" called Al to Heaven, clutching his head and shaking it from side to side. He retreated into the office.

Still, some days later, Grace heard that Al was speaking of her as a "sweet girl," and when they next met they greeted each other as if nothing had happened. Neither cared or dared to make an open enemy of the other. Each had learned the Christian lesson of forgiving and forgetting, though not from motives of high magnanimity. To fight those who harm one and cherish those who aid one, to be proud, to be dangerous, and to be loyal is too primitive and difficult a process for this civilized world. It taxes the mind and emotions far less and is altogether better business to forgive and forget.

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN Anita returned to New York winter was in full possession—a wet winter, a sickly winter, chilling the blood into sluggish mounds, turning a gray snow into slush and mud among the morass of cobblestones by the station. She had come to New York an energetic novice, had left it as a cool, experienced resident. She returned a stranger. New York did not recognize her, and in the midst of its docks and cobblestones, its trucks and wagons splashing mud to either side, foggy, gray with the drizzle, on the way to its markets, she was lost, very small, uncertain. A porter, noticing her in her brown coat by the cheap valise, indicated the Travelers' Aid Society. This made her laugh, though it hurt too. She felt like a person who had been cut dead by an old friend. And though she had resolved not

to trouble Grace till she was settled, she went eagerly to a telephone booth and asked to see her at once.

On the way to the M. A. N. office she stopped by her old rooming house. A sign announced its sale; the wreckers had set their seals on its door and walls. With small-town faith, Anita had counted on this dreary house, the greetings of her landlady, on her old room or one just like it. Now there remained between her and complete disassociation only Grace.

She had to wait for Grace amid the heavy consequence of carpets, plush and oak. She was announced and ushered into the presence by a devious way through a great main office and short passages that made no attempt to keep the elegant promise of the reception room. Grace's desk in the Publicity Department was one of a number lost under pictures, papers, and telephones. Grace was typing and waved her hand. "Sit down a minute, Anita. I have to finish this."

She seemed to have taken on an impressive amount of assurance and a soft sheen, partly of grooming, partly of well-being, by which Anita, as she watched her, was more and more abashed. Her own shoes were sensible in rubbers, her gloves were not too fresh, and her hat bore traces of the drizzle. Grace, in a dark blue suit perfectly attuned to her like all her clothes, with the pale light of amber beads falling over the delicacy of her blouse, with her skin that appeared to have a richer glow over cheeks that had lost their hollows—this Grace was so aloof from her that no words and no attempted kindness could possibly reach across the space between them. Of course, Grace had to be polite for the sake of old times,

old confidences—how old those times seemed suddenly! —but how could she have expected concern, the warmth of intimacy? She had better go, she thought. She was on the point of rising and going forthwith when Grace at last turned to her.

"Do you know what I'm doing?" she said. "I'm justifying my college education. I figured out a way to connect George Bernard Shaw's Superman with Babe Jean, the baseball player, who's under contract to us for one picture. They call him the Sultan of Swat. So I suggested—why not cable G. B. S. and ask if we might not advertise Babe Jean as the—Superman of Swat. Shaw is always good for loads of newspaper space. And luck was with us! To-day we got a cable from Shaw: 'Never heard of her. Whose Baby is Jean?' And Mr. Williams thinks we'll make every front page in the country."

At this moment Mr. Williams hurried out of the inner office and leaned over Grace with a marked gallantry. "Are you through, Grace? Would you let me have the stuff, then? I want to hold it over for the morning papers. I'll plant it myself. That was certainly one swell hunch of yours!"

He ran his eyes swiftly over the page and a half, came to a point that pleased him and nodded vigorously. "Yop. You made your sale fine!"

"I'll see that you get full credit for it," he assured her, and hastened away.

When the door of his private office had shut Grace said to Anita with a small, sly smile, "He likes me." She stretched in her chair, a gesture of voluptuous weariness after enjoyed and appreciated effort. "I'm having a

grand time," she confided. "I've even stopped—worrying so much. Roy Williams is awfully nice to me. I'm supposed to do mostly woman's-page stuff for the press books, fashions, and feature stories, but he lets me try my hand at anything that comes up. It's lots of fun and so much easier than the Strauss job."

She had not yet asked about Anita. Now she looked her over, seeming abstracted, and remarked, "You look well. Have you decided what you'll do?" She rose as she said this, took her coat from the back of a chair, picked up a pale amber-colored hat and various possessions from the desk. "Come out with me. We can talk better outside." Anita followed unwillingly.

She went with Grace to buy a pair of stockings. On the way she was regaled with such bits of gossip as Grace felt she would surely wish to know. Letty was engrossed with Paul. Harold had gone into the lace business with a friend. He was also growing more docile.

"He's even got to the point where he'll make lunch dates with girls," announced Grace triumphantly. "And he no longer turns up his nose at me—so much."

"How's Blake?"

"Very well," said Grace in a cool voice. "You know, it's interesting," she added reflectively, as if repeating an explanation that had often been in her mind, "to watch the—er—balance—waver between us. At first —Blake was the chief person and I was a nobody. I cared for him more than he cared for me. But gradually I've been watching the balance sort of—even up. And now on this job I've been doing so well and making so

many new friends, I can see—the balance swing slowly over to my side."

Anita listened without much interest and wondered how she could leave, and where to go when she left. They turned a corner.

Grace urged her: "Come up to Diana Reece's place. It's right here. She's away but she gave me the key. I want to see what you think of it. You know—I was thinking—Dee's place is only thirty-five a month. I'm starting a feature for the Enterprise Syndicate on Wives of Famous Men, and if I could only make enough out of it to pay the rent—I'd be ready to leave Ma. Dee's awfully sweet to me; she said if I took over the place she'd let me have her furniture. So you see—I'm almost set."

Yes, Anita saw, and the contrast between their conditions depressed her more than ever. Not for the first time, this talent of Grace's for ranging and consolidating trifles to form a stable background, a stable shelter, a stable footing seemed to her enviable. With Grace, one thing always led to another and more profitable thing.

Diana Reece's studio was a tiny front room in an old house off Fifth Avenue. This house, soon to suffer the fate of all old houses, stood far back from the street in a courtyard decorated with plaster statues that belonged to the shop next door. The statues of lions and angels were ghostlike in the gray mist; the house, black stairs after black stairs of which they climbed, smelled of mold and ancient woodwork, and Diana Reece's room was icy.

Grace turned on an electric heater and sat by it,

drawing fresh, sheer stockings over her white feet. The room took on an air of graciousness from her movements, of comfort, of animation. The stockings, with their fragile smoothness of new silk, just reward for Grace's labors, struck Anita with the full force of her own idleness. She felt the darns on her own heels and toes. And she was even a little older than Grace. And here she sat, idle, with a cheap valise checked at a station, little money, and no home. She got up.

"I really have to go now. I ought to find a room to-day anyhow."

Grace contemplated her out of startled eyes that grew deeper, larger, softer. "Haven't you a room?" she exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me? Do you mean to hunt for a room in this weather?"

"Well, I have to," said Anita miserably. "Unless I want to go to the Y. W. And I don't care for that."

After a long pause Grace started to plan in her deliberate accents. "You're so funny, Anita. I suppose you'll turn on me for suggesting this, but—you know you *could* stay here for a while. I wanted to tell you, but I thought . . . Anyhow, Dee never uses the place except to work. If you got out before ten and came back around five, I know she wouldn't mind your staying here. I sleep here myself now and then. It's—convenient. All I have to do is walk down Fifth Avenue to the office. This couch is very comfortable, and see, you have a heater, and it wouldn't cost you a cent."

"It's awfully decent of you," murmured Anita. "I don't know . . ."

"Oh, don't be proud! Just this once, don't be proud—

please. It doesn't mean a thing to Dee. Keep your suitcase under the couch, and she won't even know you've been here!"

With relief, Anita yielded.

"Er—I saw Mr. Milford the other day," added Grace carefully. "He asked about you. You wouldn't want your old job back, would you?"

"No!"

"Well. I only asked. And you know—I'll look around for you, if you like."

"Not if it's a bother to you," said Anita. "It's ever so kind of you. I thank you and all that."

She was grateful, some of the burden slipped from her mind, and as a small, immediate token of gratitude, she now gave deep attention to Grace's talk.

"I have a lunch date with Tommy Manship," Grace was saying. "Did I tell you about him? He's on the dramatic staff of the *Times*. He's a cute lad and we are progressing by leaps and bounds, you might say."

"How's your baritone?"

"Oh! My baritone! I can't get *rid* of him. The latest development is—that he wants to marry me. I almost think I would, too, if he weren't so—Italian and so jealous. That's not so good. But I'd like to marry someone, then get divorced right away. Blake, as you can imagine, doesn't think much of the idea. But really, if you've once been married it's such—an advantage. An old wedding ring is a sort of—ad that you're no longer a virgin, and no one cares to check up on you further. If I had my life to live over again, as the saying goes, I'd marry at the earliest possible moment, at sixteen,

when it's easy because you can fall for practically anybody, and be divorced, naturally, pretty soon, and then I'd have *that* behind me. I could always say I'd been married and I could do just as I pleased. That's the advice I'm going to hand on to *my* daughter, if I ever have one, which seems—unlikely."

Anita smiled. "What's the matter with this Tommy Manship person?"

"Oh. He's too smart. He guesses about Blake, I think. Not that I take any great pains to hide the fact. By the way, I have another man—too. He sells plate glass and reads poetry. Honest. I like him. But—he's married, separated from his wife. They're all married and separated," said Grace with a sigh. "The older you get, the more married and separated they are."

Anita began to laugh.

"Wait," said Grace darkly. "You'll see. Unless you can get interested in *children*. I can't. Walk over to the Algonquin with me."

In the lobby of the Algonquin, with its air of hush and velvet duskiness, the pale lights being lost among the somber shadows of deep armchairs, like candlelights in a cathedral, Grace resumed her former preoccupation. Drawing herself up in her sealskin coat that shone in the dimness, she seemed to set herself apart within an intangible circle of cool importance as she nodded here and there from a height and called remote hellos to girls whose coats likewise shone, to men who walked briskly here and there, nowhere, deigning to greet others of their kind. As her luncheon partner rose she turned to Anita in an attitude of dismissal.

"I'll think about a job for you. I'll let you—know," she said, her eyes fixed elsewhere.

And these words, trite and chilly congé to the job hunter, spattered from Grace's lips like so many hard, cold drops of rain, one by one, on Anita's new mood of hope, made her shrink and huddle into herself as she walked back along the foggy streets to her room.

CHAPTER FOUR

THUS began some weeks of existence, almost without substance or foundation, like the existence of a haunting wraith. In the morning it was necessary to leave the studio bearing no traces of her presence. It was not safe to return before evening. Then Anita, like a ghost, would look wistfully at the marks impressed on it by less immaterial lives, teacups on the desk, the curtains drawn, the wicker chairs grouped cosily about the heater, a box of candy, a few flowers. She felt that she had sunk far beyond the reach of this other region, where people bought flowers and chatted over teacups, and when, now and then, a ray of kindliness struck from this world into her nether sphere, she was disproportionately touched. Sometimes Grace left word for her to see such and such a person who might "know of something." Once she found a note from Diana Reece urging

her to eat breakfast at the Reece table as often as she cared.

It was generous of Diana Reece, but it never could have occurred to Anita to accept. She had discovered a cafeteria where, for exactly twenty-two cents, she ate baked beans, cornbread, and coffee every day at eleven o'clock. This served both as breakfast and lunch. Dinner at the same cafeteria cost no more than fifty cents if she chose sparingly. She got to know very well the park, the museums, the reading rooms and stone benches of the Public Library, and all the streets within walking distance.

Although she followed Grace's suggestions, nothing ever came of them and Anita, in spite of her predicament, was secretly glad. Grace counseled her to do as she, Grace, would have done—to take, if one had to, any job, no matter how unsatisfactory temperamentally, and unflinchingly mold either herself or the job into some sort of suitability, meanwhile keeping an eye on other mouseholes, or, as Grace put it, "waiting for something —to turn up." To Grace everyone was playing cat; you had to in order to get along and of course one wished to get along. There was no choice. Anita, however, knew that for her there were distinct limits to the amount of endurance she would invest in any undertaking; inevitably there would confront her the question as to whether the undertaking was worth so much irritation and so much effort to her; if the answer were negative, off she would go, not even stopping to choose a sensible exit.

In the end, Grace did not succeed in understanding;

she succeeded only in being patient with what she considered a stubborn whim. Anita sometimes wished that she had not accepted Grace's aid in the first place, and often she wished with all her heart that Grace had not permitted her a glimpse of Grace's world. In spite of her suspicions, it seemed to be the only world in which she could and should strive for a foothold, a successful world. Moreover, it was enticingly open to her; it was Grace's helpful determination to keep it open for her, not to permit Anita to sink into the obscurity of, say, a factory hand or a waitress, as Anita might otherwise have chosen to do. Anita felt grateful; she felt the conscientious person's obligation to do her best to live up to what was expected of her, and yet somehow she was not so grateful after all. Emulation of Grace, a sort of competitiveness, the restlessness with which her first meeting with Grace had left her, the feeling which she had had in Diana Reece's studio when she thought that here she was even a little older than Grace and yet in so much more uncertain a position—such comparisons made a rope about her neck, strangling her initiative.

It was Grace who finally remembered that Harold Moses had once sympathized with Anita's interest in factories.

"He might know of a job you'd like," she said. "He used to do all the hiring for his firm. He knows a lot of employment people. And he's a cousin of Ella Alvyn, the one who's so mixed up in charities and child labor and that sort of thing. Be sure and get a letter to her."

So Anita went to see him. She found that, as Grace had indicated, his training as a husband had awakened

Harold to his first close observation of women as people. A year ago he had thought her a little peculiar. Now, though he knew too much about factories not to laugh at her tentative remark that she would like to work in one, yet there was sympathy in his laughter for, underneath the suggestion, impossible enough as he saw it, there lay a feeling which they had in common, a feeling indefinable to him which had often come to him unreasonably in the midst of swarming, clacking, zooming power machines, the whirling black belts overhead, the Italian and Jewish operators singing—wailing rather—long and monotonous chants as the soft lengths of silk grazed their fingers. A feeling which he only realized through its resultant satisfaction. A sense perhaps of brushing through layers of cobwebs that clung to eyes, ears, and mind and at last seeing under his feet the worn yet still unwearied earth of toil—the least common denominator of toil—and he himself in it, sunk in that earth and drawing power from it, like everyone else. Ugly it was and smelly in a workroom, yet, as often happens with real ugliness, there was a weird harmony in its distortion—the features of beauty, placed, as it were, upside down—which equaled the charm of beauty for the fascinated and reconstructing imagination.

Now, one day in the week, he would borrow his partner's car and drive out to the cottages of the lace makers in New Jersey, ostensibly to collect their product but really to rid himself of the boredom of that work which, difficult though it was, yet seemed unreal—approaching buyers, showing samples, taking orders, outwitting competitors—and to stand again in the midst

of a toil felt, smelt, heard and seen. Anita could understand this. Half-amused, he asked her if she would like to ride out with him that day.

It was the first afternoon since her return to New York on which she had felt alive. With work, the common, veritable substance of it all around her, she forgot that she was hunting for work herself. She forgot that she existed only by sufferance and through other people's occasional benevolence.

In New York the snow had melted into sodden remnants and was being shoveled away. Here, on the Jersey side, it covered gray streets with a robust splendor, reflecting the ice-blue sky; safe even in the sunlight which was accompanied by a beating wind. Anita waited in the car during the first calls, outside of low, long outbuildings like garages, that vibrated with the hum of the Schiffli machines. As they rode farther into town Harold pointed out cottage after cottage with its wooden structure beside it, sealed tightly without, warm and active within.

She was permitted to enter one at last and met the lace maker, a stooped German, all one color like the warped walls of his shed. With a sort of tender pride he exhibited the sweep of his Schiffli, he showed her the pattern, like a scroll of dots and dashes for a player piano, attached to a part of the machine, which thereafter repeated it time after time, mingled it in magical fashion with the threads of the net base. She did not care to ask many questions, just to see the wheels go round, the fine threads stretched on the framework of the machine that went the length of the building, the threads being

picked up with a precise, an unceasing subtlety, and intertwined. The lace maker's young son walked back and forth on the ledge, watching the web. At a table in a corner his daughter threaded bobbins, while his wife sat in the sunshine under a closed window, skillfully patching places where the machine had not functioned. They all worked quietly, evenly, while the Schiffli droned in the background seeming to weld them also together. Each time the wife caught Anita's eye she smiled and Anita smiled; step by step the lace maker explained the processes of his machine, how it did not really make lace at all but embroidery on a net base, which base was later removed by a chemical bath. As they reached the end his boy looked up with a bashful grin.

Harold had his last order wrapped up in heavy brown paper and gave them a fresh design and a new order. When they got outside Anita asked what a family like that could earn.

"After they pay for the thread and the instalment on the machine they do well to clear say fifty or sixty a week in good times," said Harold.

He started his car. The little cottage, disappearing down the length of the street, looked tiny between two banks of snow. Against the brilliance of the snow its lines were etched clearly, if lightly, and its sides were smoothed with a patina of its own, all of one color, like the lace maker's face, the humble color of use.

They hardly spoke on the way home. Anita was immersed in re-tasting the afternoon, bit by bit, and wished to be left alone. She set out to walk from Harold's office under the now dark sky, through the peopled streets

with their round lamps that gleamed at intervals, and reached the studio ruddy, bounding with cheer and vigor.

She found Grace and Blake there. "Hello," said Grace. "Look," she said, rising and slowly revolving. "How do you like my new outfit? Letty and I changed clothes for to-night."

Against a rough tweed suit of the blue that madonnas wear in ancient paintings, her skin shone warmly, and the same lucid blue glowed in beads about her throat. Excitement had tinged her cheeks the faintest, pearliest pink and the pupils of her eyes hid like great, dusky shadows beneath a thin glaze of brilliance. Never, Anita thought, had she seen her so lovely.

"Hul-lo," she said wonderingly.

Blake, sitting over the heater, pale, with a wry twist to his lips, remarked, "I have had the merits of that shade of blue analyzed for me in detail within the past half hour. We have considered the question from every angle, together with sidelights upon the virtues of black, brown, orange, amber——"

Grace began her special laugh.

"As a matter of fact, we've been talking mostly about Blake's play. Do you know Blake has met a man who writes music—and they're all set to do a musical comedy together? Blake is going to do the book and lyrics. Really it sounds awfully good."

He would not be diverted. "——and the detestable properties of cerise," he continued. "Cerise is a loathsome color. It is a vulgar color. It is a color that fat women choose by instinct. Tell us exactly what should be done with cerise, Grace."

Grace paid him a due tribute of amusement before she turned to Anita.

"Well," she said, "did you get that letter?"

"What letter?"

"To Ella Alvyn. Or did he call her up for you? What did you do this afternoon?"

With a sinking heart, Anita stood looking down at the futile débris of her afternoon, feeling helpless. What had she done? She had not advanced her purpose; one thing had not led to something better. She had seen a machine and defined the color of a cottage.

"I—there wasn't a chance to ask him," she said slowly. "He never mentioned her so——"

"For goodness' sake!" exclaimed Grace. She shook her head and sighed. "Why would he mention her, unless you asked? Then—then nothing happened?" Seeing Anita's face, she went over and took her arm. "Never mind," she said, "I'll call him first thing in the morning. I could speak to Ella Alvyn myself, even. She's the president of our alumni association and she knows me. But Harold would be better. He's a first cousin, you know. . . . I'll—I'll speak to him. Let's have dinner together, shall we? There's a nice place across the street—not expensive," she added to Anita's frown.

Blake put in suddenly, "I'll go with you."

"Aren't you due home?"

He did not answer.

"I don't want to—interfere—with your arrangements," said Grace with a dignity more measured than usual. "Besides—I have an engagement after dinner, you know."

In silence they walked across the street. Blake went to a wall telephone. He spoke too low for their ears, but when he returned his pale face had grown more pallid, his lips were dry and tight. He took up the menu as a shield, swallowing behind it, so that the eyes of the two girls should not pick him out, should not strip him more raw than he already felt.

"I suppose she was very much upset," remarked Grace. She spoke to Anita. "I don't blame her," she said with feeling. "I can imagine how—it must be—to wait for someone with dinner on the table, and all at once—to have him call up and announce—he won't be home."

She chatted on, seeming ever lovelier, gayer, less concerned, subordinating them, rising far above them on the wings of her beauty and serenity. When it came time to pay the check Grace ostentatiously placed a dollar on the table; Anita did the same. It was understood that Blake never had any money. He flushed, drew out his dollar, and, without looking, thrust the bills at the waitress. Grace glanced toward him expectantly, repeating that she had a date. He rose and left them.

Anita had to accompany Grace to Grand Central to meet, as Grace confided with a complacent smile, the plate-glass salesman who read poetry. People turned to survey Grace, poised by the train gate, drawn by the power of her glowing face, of her dominant mood, of her feet moving so buoyantly that they seemed fluent over the stone, and Anita watched her, feeling heavy by her side, very poor, very dull. When the train arrived she said a hasty good-bye. This time she would not wait for dismissal.

CHAPTER FIVE

Row after row of sedate brownstone houses met Blake in his part of Brooklyn and stolidly followed his homecoming. There was no shaking them off. When he left one behind, a similar house rose beside it. In summer a few hotels before whose doors lines of taxis churned, along whose tops roof gardens sparkled in the sky, sent a thin trill of vivacity through the surrounding section; in winter even the hotels were quiet. He chose his own home by number instead of by recognition and, noting his baby carriage behind the stairs, he knew that he had made no mistake. All the circumstances of his daily return: the evidence of the child; the bell ticking eagerly to his ring; the door opening to his footsteps; the shaft of light in its angle, ready to embrace—all these details, a source of cheer and comfort perhaps to

his neighbor returning like himself, he never failed to find oppressive. He just brushed his wife's cheek, so softly extended, and went by.

Edith spoke of the weather, carefully circling his defection from dinner. They never quarreled. She was determined that he should have no fault to find with her, not realizing that, with a person one should love and doesn't, the very lack of faults is in itself the most alienating fault.

She hung up the coat he had thrown over a chair. There was nothing more to do in the kitchen so she sat down near him. She was tall, graceful, had always carried herself with dignity, and a strain, a weariness about her, the first hint of the erosion of her daily life, could not destroy the perfect balance of her features, the peculiar charming shade of her red hair, firmly coiled. All her gestures remained calm. When she wheeled the baby carriage, thinking—thinking of Blake and of their child and of herself—people would take her for a nice-looking young matron, a little pale perhaps, a little tired from household duties.

"I guess I'll lie down," said Blake. "Will you leave some coffee for me?"

He preferred to work from midnight to dawn, then to sleep till afternoon, a schedule to which his wife had adapted herself with distinct doubts of its irregularity. Especially now, since the birth of the baby, she found the custom trying. But she would not say much. Only . . .

"Is Jerry coming again?"

"No. He can't work without a piano."

She looked relieved. Jerry was to write the music for the play, and when he and Blake collaborated, clicking a typewriter and humming portions of songs, the baby stirred, Edith was afraid the neighbors might complain. Someone had already spoken to the janitor about the noise of the typewriter in the small hours. She mentioned this to Blake without comment.

He glanced up quickly. "I could work in Jerry's room," he said. "I'll have to anyhow, once in a while. He can't do much here because there is no piano."

"Where would Jerry sleep then?"

"Oh, well . . ." He did not feel that he cared to explain the various ways in which Jerry whiled away his nights.

"It won't be very pleasant for me, to be alone," said Edith softly.

"Well, we don't have to work together yet. I thought, if you had rather . . ."

"No. Only—the baby—but I think he's grown used to it."

Blake said no more.

It was this indifference, an impenetrable neutrality of action, word, expression, that defeated her time after time as the smooth back of a duck defeats drops of water. With a man who ignored the past and would not glance at the future, she found fewer and fewer loopholes to evoke past tendernesses, to envisage future plans. She watched him from under her lids. He sat on the couch, turning the sheets of a newspaper and, though he uttered no word, it was apparent that he waited for her to relinquish him so that he could go to sleep. He

sat there, sober, thin-faced, with his mouth in a tight line. Of late he held his mouth in a glummer, closer line than ever and spoke as if it were a trouble to open it.

She observed—but it was so impossible to feel, to know what he thought. The effort to concentrate and seize his mind behind the pale, high temples only drained her own mind of every idea, of every hope, and left her dry, her body taut, and within her, her nerves, the muscles of her heart fluttering in a disordered measure, frightening, unrestrainable. She made a grimace, attempting to control them, concluding, as she always did, that she had been weakened by the birth of the child. She was not able to rise just yet.

To justify her presence she asked with a certain timidity, though it was such a natural question from a wife to a husband, "Are you worried over anything?"

A fresh line cut itself between his brows. He shook his head.

But this gesture was not colorless as usual; there was a distinctness to it, a harshness, that seemed to her to offer a clue. "Would it be about money?"

"Do you need any money?" he said briefly.

"I shall soon."

Now he pondered above the paper, studying the wall and keeping very quiet. This silence cut her to the heart. In the past she had perhaps laid too much emphasis on his pursuit of an alien will-o'-the-wisp, on the snapping of those moorings which she could see no sensible reason to loosen. She was sorry for that, even if she still saw no reason and still longed for the moorings. In spite of herself, she often tried to impress upon him

subtly the harassment of their present life in contrast to their old life, hoping the difference would become as clear to him as it was to her, certain that once it was clear it would also be abhorrent. At the same time she could not bear to see him thus struggling with his eyes on the opposite wall. And at the same time it was true that she would soon need money, and it was Blake she had to look to for its provision.

"I'll have to ask Fred," he muttered, more to himself than to her. "He ought to have some ready for me now."

"I can't see why he doesn't pay you regularly," ventured Edith.

"Oh, it's the way they do things. The acts don't always pay regularly. It's show business." He emphasized the last words by a sneer and Edith glanced at him with a sudden, swift hope.

"Blake," she said, "I have a letter from your mother. Wouldn't you like to go back home for a short visit and look around? Perhaps you would like it so much better now." In her eagerness, she was leaning over and looking wistfully into his eyes.

He withdrew them. "No!" he said.

"It wouldn't be giving up. It would be just a visit."

"No."

But they were talking now, they were discussing their common life, and even negation was more cheerful than a return to silence.

"You know I'm not so well, Blake," she went on gently. "It's my heart."

He could not help a pale smile behind the paper. He looked to see whether she, too, had noticed. But no,

she was entirely unaware, entirely serious, as she continued, "Having the child has strained my heart, the doctor says."

Now he looked her straight in the eye. "Whose fault was that?" his eyes challenged her, and, flushing, she would not lower hers and answered them with pride.

"Well?" he said.

"The rest would do me good."

He rustled a sheet of his paper while she waited. She had some moments to imagine the elation with which she would return home, the relief at having removed him, at least for a while, from this environment which had so changed him, so that his next words struck her with twice the force of surprise.

"Well, why don't you go, then?" he said quietly. "I guess I can raise the fare, if that worries you."

She was speechless. She stared at him, searching his immobility with a last intense and useless effort, like a searchlight attempting to probe a stone wall. Every line of his face was obvious to her; she saw the tight-shut lips, the pale brows drawn together, the cheeks too thin for their squareness, and a light lock of hair falling over the temples, and that was all. For a second his neutrality had vanished; a rift had appeared in the wall, offering a glimpse of what lay behind it, and had closed in that second, too swiftly for her to see. Why had she not been alert? Now, search as she would, scan every detail of his expression, no trace remained of where the rift lay, much less of why it lay there, if it did. She rose at last. At the door she paused, trying to get less than an idea, merely a hint of some idea.

"Would it relieve you," she asked, "if I went home for a time?"

"What do you think?"

She went into the kitchen and set about making fresh coffee with many small busy movements, so as not to think at present. When she looked into the room again the light had been put out and she could not see his face where he lay on the couch. But she thought that he slept.

CHAPTER SIX

Not till the plant has forged through the ground can we see that the seed was fertile and events ripe for its blossoming. Thus, too, our lives are made up of accidents, chance seeds of the residue Nature provides against barrenness, blown by the wind of every-day, taking no root in our existence; and of coincidences which are accidents that find the soil receptive and come to fruition. Without specific design on Blake's part, the conjunction of a certain mood of his and certain words of Edith's had caused to happen that which he and Grace had so much desired. Edith had withdrawn voluntarily. She went home on what she thought was a long visit. Blake had merely now to keep her there, which was simpler.

The sunshine of the noons to which Blake opened his

eyes that summer stroked his lids with a special zest. He had divested himself of the apartment in Brooklyn and gone to live with Jerry. From the first moment of waking he felt the hum of the street outside, a midtown Manhattan street that repeated like a second, fainter chorus the shining song of Fifth Avenue, mingled with the troubled, grimier notes of Sixth, where men stood with eyes glued to employment lists, where the El roared and small shops jostled each other and clamored. Blake's bed was soft and wide. It was part of the bedroom suite brought from St. Louis via Brooklyn, and in the midst of the dark blue hush of a semi-sacred parlor set which Edith had once chosen with such care, Jerry sprawled, his clothes neatly folded and himself sunk in a red, torpid slumber.

Their place and the house itself had the quietude of sleep, in spite of the sunshine, the sound of wheels sizzling up the black, hot street, the hoots of cars and a light zigzag of some work far off that rose, that ebbed, that never ceased. Negro maids were treading the carpeted stairs, clicking keys in doors closed upon a similar silence, and outside the black porter applied luster to the banisters with a languid hand.

When the telephone buzzed Blake dragged it into bed with him by its cord and spoke sleepily to Grace. "Hello," he said, and "Yes," he said with a yawn, "I'm just getting up." A more distinct effort of gallantry greeted the next call. Nearly every day this female voice, which had phoned to ask about one of his vaudeville playlets, continued to pursue him with semi-mysterious and flattering banter.

"Who'z'at?" called Jerry drowsily from the living room. He made his entrance, rumpled, opening and shutting gelid lids to the motes of sunshine, as if in a sort of exercise, and in his brief glimpses expressing disapproval of the tossed state of the room. In contrast with his genial disposition and life of easy concurrence, Jerry was a stickler for the tidiness of material objects. He picked up things; he straightened things; ashes on the carpet turned his face wry as much as a false note or a piano out of tune. "Who'z'at?" he said, and sitting down on the bed, "I got to cut this out."

"No one for you. You want to train your lady friends not to call you at 3 A. M. There was some girl ringing this phone every half hour from three to five."

"Same girl? Mm. Musta been Madalynne. You got yours trained, haven't you?" said Jerry sadly.

In leisurely fashion, Blake's day unwound ahead of him. He walked up his street which pleased him with its width, the houses having long ago been built back so that they, too, seemed to have leisure. On Sixth Avenue he passed the groups of men who stood before the employment bulletins, their hands hanging loose, their mouths dully open, peering at each letter and still irresolute whether to enter or leave, as if they knew that, no matter which action they chose, it would come to the same thing in the end. The air, brilliant with heat, picked out each spot of wear, each harsh line, awkward bones, and coarse hands, weaving in and out and about the groups in a nimble grotesquerie of light and more light and in final, swift rays not ignoring the stocky ankles of women, the cheap glazed fibers of a stocking,

a smudge of a face, dingy, blemished, under the inquiring eye of the sun. Blake moved around them. Turning the corner, he went by the Friars' Club. Here was another knot of men loath to leave the sunshine that stroked their sleek shoulders and polished boots and tinged full cheeks and fleshy cheeks. Blake sent a cool glance through this group. He knew some of the men by sight.

When he reached the restaurant on Broadway he opened his mail and lost some of his tranquillity. He had a letter from his wife, three pages of small, even words, upon which a few bulbs, burning high in the chandelier even at noon, cast a weird, too-naked light. It was as if this room could not exist without some promise of the glittering night. Its chandeliers were gilded and its walls were adorned wherever possible with the same grimy gilt. The raucous blonde hair of his waitress remonstrated harshly with long, dusty rays of sunlight creeping in—and so did her gold teeth.

He wished to tear the letter up but there was no place to throw the pieces, so with a frown he restored it to his pocket. He had formed the habit of sending his wife money with merely a line of enclosure, but her small, even words continued to groove a path to reach him, each word wearing as a drop of water, each containing a minute part of the energy of its sender, and each to be evaded by the intangible negation of its recipient.

Afterward Blake went to the theater where his show was to be rehearsed. At the press agent's suggestion they had sent out a call for chorus girls with long hair. Blake found a few reporters; Jerry, with his coat off, harangu-

ing the orchestra which he was to conduct; and the bare lines of the stage, its bare steps, even its bare floor, hidden by the soft bodies, the pale arms, long legs, the bright clothes of girls. Most of them had taken off their hats, and a few had even loosened their hair, spreading triumphant, delicate fans of gold and auburn, of dusk and chestnut about them.

The press agent was counting the long-haired ones. He returned in disgust.

"This is Mother's Day in the Old Ladies' Home," he said. "Not a long-haired dame under forty, I swear."

"There's a little blonde over there," suggested a reporter.

"Yeh—go look at her close and you'll find she has a grandchild. If you can pick anything out of this lot——"

The producer lowered himself into a front-row seat, resting a short arm on either side and his jowls on his chest. The director, on the other hand, was a tiny, gnarled person who wiped the back of his neck with a bandanna and cursed legs and girls. The theater was choked with heat. The girls said, "Whew!" and waved bits of handkerchiefs and rubbed and powdered their noses without respite.

"Now, you girls stand up and come to the center of the stage. No. *Not* all at once. Say, you Bill, you get them into line. A dozen at a time, Bill. Goddamn this heat. Goddamn everything above two inches."

Some of the girls thought fit to smile. Others held grave faces and looked loftily up to the dome of the theater. Others drew themselves up in the line, took

a dancing pose, gyrated slowly round like models. And each dozen, clad in varying plumage—in summer silk that clung to hips and breasts, in organdy with great, crisp hats, in practice bloomers that exposed pink flesh, dimples, the slim bones of ankles in businesslike nakedness, leaving the girls as pathetically unhidden as long, plucked fowls—each dozen moved with sealed faces, with indifferent faces, with open giggles before the lidded eyes of the producer and the sneering inspection of the director, before Blake to whom they all looked flawed for his show, who was disappointed in all of them, before Jerry who was touched by each pretty face, before the reporters who were pleased to be in the presence of so many chorus girls.

"Here, you with the Dutch cut—no, *not* you—that girl there." A girl seemed startled, said, "Me?" and stepped to one side. "You with the blue bloomers. Yeh. That one. And that one. Step back you with the hair and let me see the others. Yes, I mean you. Goddamn it, dear, *will* you step back?"

The producer whispered to the director.

"That little girl with the curls, didn't I see you around the Savoy in London?"

The others cast sharp looks from her to the men. "Why, I've been to England," said the girl haughtily.

Someone snickered.

"Just stop that noise, now, just stop that noise," shouted the director. "Whaddye think this is, a tea party? You girls, what are you waiting for? If your names haven't been taken, go on home. Go on. Get them out, Bill."

A girl called, "You haven't even looked at us."

"Oh, I haven't looked at you, haven't I? All right, step forward, I'll look at you now."

She stepped forward hardily, pirouetted, kicked out and would have continued.

"That's all right," snapped the director. "You don't have to go into your dance for us. We know you're a Pavlowa. But I'll say that for you, dear," he added, "you're worth looking at. Take her name, Bill. Any others we haven't looked at? Come on. Step forward or go home."

Those who had not been chosen lingered about the stage. The youth named Bill, his collar open at the throat, a pad in his hand, dispersed group after group into receding fragments, only to have them congeal again, murmuring, with eyes on the men who had not yet gone, opposing to his hoarse shouts the massed immobility of their hope. Drive them as he would, they moved forward, they moved back, unheeding, passive, according to some pattern of their own instinct.

"Only two in the bunch with long hair," said the press agent to the reporters. "That's a hot one for you."

"These babies look all right, but can they sing and dance? That's what I'd like to know," said the director. "Bill, tell 'em to come here same time to-morrow. Hey, you, all of you whose names we got, same time to-morrow. And no use any of you others coming—hear me? —no use!"

He added pessimistically, "Better send out a call for another batch."

When Blake turned the corner of his street again

the retreating sun had strewn the sky with minute pink clouds, crisping one within the other like rose petals across one side of heaven. Lucent the air lay over the brownstone houses and bright summer awnings of tea rooms and over the bodies of limousines before the smooth shop windows. And in his house, where the windows were open, the light swam over Grace's pure skin as in another ether, in tiny bounding motes of light and shade. There was a mote on her nose and one that fled along her cheek and he kissed these, searching them out to the reward of her deep amusement. They made a circuit of the room in an embrace exaggerated so as not to come within the terms of sentimentality, an improbable embrace, a travesty on embraces, which yet could not conceal the force and persistence of their arms about each other, their utter absorption in each other, as, like great actors immersed in their parts, they set up a dais for themselves and swept below, aside, the audience of Jerry and his exuberant Madalynne.

Madalynne was a girl with a superfluity of everything —of flesh, of hair, of clothes, of complexion, of voice, and of the love which she lavished on Jerry. Even her name was over-spelt. With Grace she had felt it necessary to adopt a superfluity of dignity, matching, she thought, Grace's own, but in the presence of this embrace she felt that the barriers had been let down. She cast herself on Jerry's bosom, exuding baby talk at every pore.

Grace and Blake laughed into each other's eyes with a mute laughter, with a derisive understanding. "The perfect hot momma," murmured Grace, and aloud, tak-

ing pity on Jerry, she said to him, "Does Blake's mysterious lady still call every day?"

"Does he tell you that?" said Jerry. He freed himself by a number of shakes and pats, good-natured and indifferent, much as one does with an over-fond dog. "I'll never understand you two."

"And you stand for it?" demanded Madalynne. "My God! How can you bear it?" she cried. "Why, if such a thing happened with Jerry I'd never rest till I settled it. And Blake, how can you act that way to your girl friend? Shame on you! Jerry wouldn't do that to Momma, would'ums? Yum-yum."

Grace quickly put her hand up to her mouth. "I want him to ask her to the opening," she said.

"So you can meet her and judge what you're up against?"

Blake could not hide a certain gratification and Grace said to him, "I can meet her without you. Dee knows a woman who knows her."

"I knew I shouldn't have told you her name."

"Always keep your girls separate," declared Jerry solemnly. "Take it from me——"

"What! What girls are *you* keeping separate, Jerry Barker?"

"Not a one, hon. Honest-to-God, dear. I'm just advising Blake. You're the only girl for me."

"That's what you *say*. But I'd like to know about this. How come you know so much about keeping girls separate? I tell you I won't stand for any of that. I don't like the idea of girls being free to chase in and out of this place—I don't mean you, Grace. You tell

Momma, Jerry, you 'fess up, you naughty boy, what've you been up to?"

"I swear to you, hon, I've had enough of—I mean—I've got you and that's enough for me."

"Jerry lov'ums his momma?"

"Absolutely, hon."

Outside, Grace remarked, "Does she really think Jerry'll marry her? She told me he promised her a diamond ring if the show went over."

"She can think what she likes," said Blake. "So he promised her a diamond ring?" He smiled sardonically. "The more fool he. He's got his hands full."

Grace sent him a strange, fleeting look. How men did resent a woman who concluded that the most heart-easing satisfaction she was likely to obtain from a man was money or its equivalent! Was it because she was a proof, which even they could not overlook, of the insufficiency of their own irresistible charms?

However, she kept quiet.

CHAPTER SEVEN

On the night Blake's play opened, as she entered the theater, the first person Anita saw was Grace. She stood at the head of the center aisle, within a little group of which she was acting as heart and core. To her throat, held aloof, as if beyond the reach of glances from the inflowing and anonymous crowd and almost beyond the reach of friendly nods, she was folded in a shawl of ivory silk. And her very soul had sheathed itself in silken hauteur, as she stood with eyes that wandered deeply over the lighted theater and the faces agog for pleasure, over silken shoulders and bare shoulders and shoulders black and gray jostling down the aisles and across the aisles toward pleasure. Now and then she murmured some preoccupied reply, not deigning to lower her eyes, to one of the group surrounding her.

Now and then she emerged from this group, swooped from her height with a sudden nod to an entering person, a greeting of unexpected cordiality, a fastening of her eyes upon him.

As Anita was about to approach she issued entirely from her circle and, with no move of seizure, with her arms close under the ivory shawl, she seemed to assume possession of a man just passing by, to spiritually clutch his coat-tails and bring him to a halt.

"I'm so glad—you could come, Maurice," she said with her significant pauses.

To the girl who had loosed his arm and moved ahead of him she gave no attention at the moment. However, without waiting for notice, this girl carelessly turned her face. It was fair as a spring morning. She drawled to Grace, "H'are yuh? Gettin' along?"

And she added with a derisive sweep of her hands up from her nose, "I see yuh're comin' up in the world—yup-in-the-world," and swayed down the aisle.

Imperceptibly, the group drew near Grace again and imperceptibly drew nearer, as if there was that in her shadow which separated them from the anonymous inflow. They kept close under her wing—Letty and Harold, the Lindens, who were friends of theirs, and some persons Anita did not know—staring about over the theater, mantled by her importance, individualizing themselves again as the friends of the author.

Anita attracted a vague "hello" from Grace. In spite of motions from Letty, she went on to her seat. She had not wished to come, but Grace seemed to find her lack of excitement annoying and she did not like to offend

Grace. The latter had been so kind about getting her her job. She was alone. She had never been to an opening night and watched with solitary interest a hocus-pocus of ceremonial new to her.

In the first rows, among which she sat, everyone seemed to perform the ritual of knowing one another. As soon as a person reached a seat, he or she would search the surrounding faces for signs of recognition and attempt to form alliance with some portion of the scattered inner circle who were making this opening their festive and intimate occasion. All the other undifferentiated faces, tiers and tiers, on the balcony, up and down the rows, pressed heavily forward; a shower of undifferentiated chatter and laughter splashed the theater like a shower of bright raindrops. One mustn't let oneself be swamped by these other faces. And every nod, every acknowledging glance, every knowing remark was a slight thread to grasp with which to outline the boundary between those within and the other undistinguished mass without. It was as if the more nods, the more smiles they collected, the more exchanges of specialized gossip, the more assurance they gained that this boundary was defined. It was as if each nod, each smile, each familiar greeting slowly brought their individualities into shape from formlessness, like chemicals etching on seemingly blank paper inch by inch the outlines of a secret script. It was as if, in the widening scope of these nods, these smiles, these familiar greetings, they could see their individualities expand and gauge their bulk, as one may gauge the bulk of a stone by the widening ripples in the water.

In the anticipant hush after the first lights had been dimmed Grace advanced down the aisle. Blake would not sit with her. Sleek in evening clothes, he spoke quietly and did his best to suppress excitement or suspense. But his voice gave him away. He was quite hoarse. Grace was saying, "Considering that it's a musical show and there are two other openings, what can you expect? The critics would naturally choose *Toreador.* Maurice Lensky came anyway—that's something. And I saw Edmond Edmonds, too. Really—if you get two of the second-string critics, that's doing very well, with two—more imposing—shows opening the same night."

Blake frowned and moved away. Her eyes looked after him in some surprise, while a smile rose to her lips, and seeing Anita near her she whispered, "He hates me to say any show is more important. I never dreamed he would take this—so seriously." She passed, smiling to herself, and was followed by Diana Porter Reece with her husband and a man who, Anita noticed gratefully, also wore his every-day clothes.

"You go sit by Anita," said Diana Reece.

Somebody shushed her. The last lights went out and left this man, whose red hair was plastered every which way on his neck and forehead, fumbling at his seat. He grinned at Anita. The curtain rose.

Soon after the play had started a whisper fluttered along the row from Grace through Diana Reece and reached Anita. She saw a man proceeding down the aisle, followed by a blonde woman who dragged tennis rackets. The man took his seat first, then drew himself away so that he hung over the aisle, in order to let the

woman pass. He continued to sit in this fashion. It was a colyumnist with his wife. From time to time Grace craned her neck to see whether he smiled or applauded.

The play was a neat little play, neither as lavish as most musical comedies nor quite as vapid. Blake had permitted himself the boast that there was not one scene in which the hero dreamed of chorus girls portraying anything, whether the Spirits of Bituminous Coal or the Fashions of Yesteryear. His boast was justified. The curtain fell on the mild glow of a neat little melody, "Your Kisses Are Blisses." The audience hummed it and the orchestra plugged away at it. All the people who knew each other rose and hurried to the lobby. "Come along," said Diana Reece kindly. So Anita came along, too.

The confusion of the lobby under yellow lights gradually resolved itself into groups of people, smiling, nodding, exchanging specialized gossip, asking each other how they liked the show and answering with an aplomb that would mark them for the initiate. "Well, what do you think of it?" "Not so hot, huh?" "Think it'll go?" "Why not?" "Got one good song." "And one set. It won't take 'em long to work off the nut, anyhow." "Good chorus. Not a bad idea, a specialty chorus."

"Well, how do you like it?" said Grace, coming up with warm cheeks of excitement and enormous eyes. "I don't know where Blake has disappeared. Everybody wants to see him."

"It's swell so far," declared Diana Reece. The bronze flesh of her shoulders shone above a blazing wrap.

Her husband added in his heavy, slow voice, "That's a good tune."

" 'Your Kisses Are Blisses.' Yes. I think—that should be a hit."

The third man kept a solemn silence. Anita thought that he looked like the Irishmen in the comic strips, square with a wide, almost lipless mouth, a stubby nose and, yes, freckles. He had, moreover, their very expression, subtly naughty and unblinkingly solemn. Grace was looking at him, too, with a coy lift of her brows that Anita understood meant she was aware of him.

"How did you like it, Dennis?" she asked.

"O. K.," said Dennis through his nose.

Diana's laughter rippled broadly. "That's all you'll ever get out of him. Look, Grace," she said. "There's your mysterious telephone lady. There's Renie Harrington, large as life and just as permanent, if you can figure out what I mean."

They all saw Blake approaching with a little golden-haired woman, all in white, lavishing animated hands, animated eyes, and an animated, pointed face entirely on him, while his own countenance showed, in spite of itself, a pale tinge of pleasure.

"Try dynamite," advised Diana. "That may dislodge her, but, mind you, I make no promises."

Grace moved toward them at once, wrapped in her ivory shawl, cool. "I've been out—gathering opinions," she said to Blake. "Everyone is crazy about that song."

The other woman paused and, in several glances, they considered each other. She made a slight retreat. "I've just been telling Mr. Andrews how *charming* my hus-

band and I think it is. And we really do know quite a bit about the theater, in spite of being amateurs. Even Mr. Andrews has heard of *our* little theater." Eyes, hands, lips, and the pointed chin all assisted in a crescendo of admiration, now discreetly including Grace.

Blake had no choice but to introduce them, so that they could measure each other in full politeness, reconnoitering with their eyes, with soft words, along each other's soft, self-contained faces for the exact situation. "You must all really come and see *our* little theater," said Mrs. Harrington. "At the Peck Settlement."

And, "Are you—coming to Blake's party after the show?" said Grace.

"If Mr. Andrews asks us," said Mrs. Harrington coquettishly. So Blake, glancing at Grace with a rueful amusement, asked her. The bell tinkled.

Again the curtain rose. This time the colyumnist's seat was empty, causing Grace's face to fall and whispers to circulate between her and Diana Reece. Only Anita and the red-haired chap remained unaffected by this discovery. Soberly, they watched the stage upon which creatures dazzling in light made no secret of a business-like exhibition of wares. Neither said a word. Each applauded conscientiously at the proper moments. At one such moment, as they caught each other's eye, Dennis became almost articulate. Pressing one half of his mouth over the other in a slow grin, like a small boy closing his lips over stolen jam, he winked. It was an expression that could not be answered by a smile; it engendered a similar grin. Anita began to laugh, feeling with surprise that she was happy for no reason.

The second closing chorus seemed brighter and the finale poured forth in an urgent volume of vari-colored melody, light, and noise, rising as high as it could or dared on the highest of high notes. The orchestra played, "Your Kisses Are Blisses." The audience rose humming, "Your Kisses Are Blisses." And out in the lobby they were selling it: "Get the music of the show—'Your Kisses Are Blisses.' "

The crowd moved slowly, unsnarled itself from the tangles at the exits, out into the summer air which no blatancy of electric lights could harden or speed. Anita had meant to slip away, but she was caught tight in a group formed by Grace, who cast her eyes everywhere, and by other people who were going to the party. Grace's eyes were somewhat shadowed. Turning to Anita, who stood nearest, she seized her arm and made a more eager effort to get out. "I'd better go home," murmured Anita, and Grace looked at her in amazement. "You won't come to the party? You're silly! You must come with me. I don't know what's happened to Blake." She was no longer remote. The outline of her face, always quick to reflect inner commotion, had hardened. It had a sudden tragic emphasis as her eyes widened, grew deep and obscure with whatever momentarily troubled thoughts engaged her. What these could be Anita did not understand, but she was caught up and swept along.

They found Blake already at his apartment, playing host to the Harringtons and to some individuals who were devoted exclusively to the cocktails. Blake strewed cheer like beams of sunshine about him. He poured

drinks for people, hastening here and there almost on the balls of his feet, and patting Anita's arm, to her great surprise. Grace seemed almost as surprised, seemed at a loss. With her all-encompassing gaze, with a serene demeanour in which lurked a hint of challenge, lovely in chiffon whose rose-hued pallor was differentiated only by a shade from the glowing pallor of her skin, she moved about under the watching eyes of Renie Harrington, defining her place as hostess. Renie Harrington's dashing eyes rested on her from time to time, sensing, retreating, adjusting. Grace went to sit by her. They engaged in animated conversation. Anita, passing by, heard Grace suggest, "Let's—have a lunch date sometime, shall we?"

Shortly, the entrance of the rest of the party was heralded by Diana Reece. She had thrown off her flaming shawl. She burst upon them from the doorway in sequins that shimmered and dazzled and glittered sinuously with each step, in bracelets that clinked, in a bar pin whose diamond sparkle went clear across the room and stabbed the eyes of a youth between cocktails and reality. He had had a deal to drink, and, blinking in this brilliance composed of scintillas that flashed before his eyes unseizably in his condition, bewildered by the rays of diamonds, the shine of golden bracelets, the fleshly luxuriance of rich dark skin and a red mouth, he had one of the sudden inspirations of the inebriate. He stalked across the room to Dee and took her hand and faced the company.

"Produced by Morris Gest," he said with due solem-

nity. And retired amid the ensuing plaudits and seemed to vanish and was heard of no more that night.

For a time, Anita and Dennis managed to sit very cheerfully together by a window open into warm and misty air. They attracted no attention. They said almost nothing, unless a series of grins and answering grins could be considered talk. She did not even know his name. There was between them the curious unrestraint of strangers meeting with no background but that of the particular time and the particular space, and sure to part there. But when Anita saw Grace stare at them with an amused and dawning comprehension in the depths of her eyes, saw Grace advance toward them, like a mutual friend breaking in upon the unbounded sympathy of strangers, enclosing it at once within the restrictions of the social order, she felt a qualm of uneasiness and wished to retreat. Dennis, however, had now managed to drink enough to simulate articulateness. He grasped her hand in alarm, pulling her back. "Ah, no! Don't go!"

Grace took a seat and surveyed them with a slight, surprised smile, with an approving intimacy.

"What do you find to say to each other?" she demanded.

Taken unawares, they raised their eyes and looked at each other with another grin. Grace stared at Dennis, then back to Anita more fully, revolving almost distinctly, on the surface of her eyes, a new appraisal of Anita's possibilities.

"Why aren't you dancing?" she suggested. They hadn't thought of it.

"Dennis is a very good dancer," said Grace. She probed Anita's face, seeming to hint for some response to what she was arranging, which was not clear to Anita. "You ought to see him on a real dance floor." She added with many pauses and the advance and inflation of her eyes, "Why don't we—have a dancing date sometime? Dennis and you and Blake and I and Dee and one of her young men?"

"O. K.," said Dennis agreeably.

"Next week—maybe?"

"O. K.," said Dennis. "Any time you say."

"Well—I'll make the arrangements—and call you," she added, and glanced at Anita for gratitude. But Anita was flushing. It seemed to her that the shameless mechanism of Grace's plans must be as apparent to Dennis as it was to her. Grace had acted in all friendliness and she would look forward to the date—and yet some of the easiness had vanished. Her face, when she looked at Dennis thereafter, must wear a certain constraint.

It was a good party. Two policemen, called by some unaccountable neighboring spinsters in the small hours, saw at once that no one was less than conventionally clothed and no one more than conventionally drunk. They agreed in righteous indignation at the insomnia of spinsters. They said, "Why this is a nice party!" They were welcomed into it. A girl borrowed one officer's cap and club and did a dance, while they watched indulgently from the doorway. They were offered a drink and did not refuse. Blake, at the peak of goodwill toward all the world, pressed passes to his show upon them. Everyone was grateful for the seal

of true abandon which they had set on the party. Everyone would be glad to tell of having been to a party which had brought police intervention. On leaving, everyone said with satisfaction, "A swell party!"

Grace was going home with Harold and Letty. She made a definite ceremony of departure for the benefit of Renie Harrington who, bolstered by her husband, sat on and glanced and sensed, an acute reminder of the exigencies of social usage. Renie Harrington's artful eyes silkily subverted the position of hostess which Grace had taken such care to indicate.

"We'll—see each other again—soon, won't we?" said Grace.

"Oh, are you going?" said Renie Harrington. And her eyes rubbed in the fact that, after all, Grace had to go. Ah, those leave-takings so often, at the end, forcing her outside!

She drew Anita apart to say good-bye.

"Is Dennis taking you home?" she inquired.

He was.

"Anita," said Grace wistfully, "he's awfully nice. We could all have such a lot of fun together if we had a place."

Her eyes were still, so still, with a velvet pathos. She looked weary and lines of strain had lengthened her cheeks above the ivory shawl. She pressed Anita's hand with a sudden clutching warmth, and had to go.

CHAPTER EIGHT

GRACE'S lunch date with Renie Harrington had to be postponed, for Renie explained that she seldom came to town during the summer. As soon as Grace heard of her return, therefore, she called up.

She was surprised to find herself haled to tea. Perhaps Renie had discovered that, socially, it was not so possible to remain unaware of Grace in connection with Blake. This was what Grace minded—not so much that Blake had been loath to reveal her existence to Renie Harrington, but that Renie could invite him to her country home for dinner—alone—and for week-ends—alone. Of course, Grace knew that she also could move in circles apart from Blake, but she didn't *want* to; it gave her a sense of stability to have the pair of them recognized as a social unit.

Renie Harrington lived on the less fashionable west side of the park. In a living room lined with books and charming trinkets, and arranged to express wealth with unusual lack of ostentation, Grace learned that her hostess spoke French and Spanish, that she knew about "incunabula," whatever they were, that she collected first editions, went to auction sales, had an acquaintance by no means naïve and worshipful, yet a bit wistful, with practitioners of the arts, and that she and her husband were wrapped up in the theater at the settlement house. Dick trained the members in acrobatic dancing and Renie helped him to choose and stage the shows. Yet she was not a "yearner," Grace thought. She was no fool and very amusing. Her hair cast a golden shadow over the sharpness of her chin and the suggestion of lines about her cherubic lips, it sent a gleam like that of a sunbeam skimming over her words, delicately shining, delicately hiding. She had many fine gestures to suit.

"Would you mind if we went to look at my child?" she said after a time. "I'm playing nurse maid this afternoon. Just think, I have three children. I'd like a fourth. But, you see, there's been a strange rivalry on that score between myself and my sister and my cousin; we were all married about the same time and whenever either of us has a child, the others feel they must have one also. After the third childbirth my cousin was left so weak that Aunt called upon Nannie and myself and said, 'Don't you think it's about time you girls stopped bearing children? You'll be the death of each other yet.' So we have ceased! *Enfin!*"

Grace raised her eyebrows and remarked that it was, indeed, a strange rivalry.

They were now in the nursery. "What do you think of Anne-Marie?" said Renie.

"She's a very—cunning child." Grace approached the crib on tiptoe. "I should say she looked rather like your husband."

"Doesn't she? Isn't it strange? You'll see how strange it is when I tell you the story."

Once more in the living room, she settled herself on a green couch, and though she did not steal looks to right and left, she gave that impression.

"I shouldn't tell you," she said. "If you'll promise to be as silent as the grave—well, and so *this* is what happened. We were in the hospital, my sister and I, at about the same time, but my little child died—and Nannie had twins! The irony of it! You can imagine how devastated I was—and there was poor Nannie with two little girls already and two more to bring up. So I had a brilliant inspiration and—in short, Nannie consented to give me one of the twins to raise as my own—and *that* twin is Anne-Marie!"

For an instant Grace was genuinely startled.

"Why, but everyone thinks you have three children of your own. I remember Dee Reece mentioned it—and Blake——"

"Oh," cried Renie with a little squeal, "but we haven't breathed it to a soul! No one knows except the immediate family. Remember, you mustn't tell—mustn't tell even Blake—though I suppose you tell each other everything?"

It was as if she had stroked Grace with a light velvet paw that yet left a faint, apprehensive suggestion of a sting either just administered or just to come. What she was after Grace did not yet quite understand. She was fairly sure of what Blake was up to—some little thing, some word or expression or lack of expression, the intuition which was not intuition at all but the most meticulous observation, never failed to give her a clue. But what might Renie Harrington be capable of?

"Not—necessarily," she said aloud.

"Well, of course," said Renie, retreating (she was good at retreats, Grace had noticed), "there might not be anything to tell! Blake is such a charming young man—and so able—and he has the most perfect taste, hasn't he? I had to come into town to do some shopping one day and whom should I stumble upon on Fifth Avenue but Blake! So he helped me choose scarves and sweaters and socks and shoes—and a really interesting cigarette case. See—isn't it fascinating?"

"Yes, it's pretty," said Grace, and in spite of her disquiet her lips curved demurely as she held the silk case in her hands. It happened that she herself had pointed out the case to Blake in a shop window; she felt certain that he had sent it to Renie. "The little cat!" she thought suddenly. "She's playing with me—those goofy stories! That's what she wanted me up here for."

But why should Renie bother to hide the fact that Blake had sent her a cigarette case? There was a story Grace had picked up about Renie in the course of her inquiries, a story which she now remembered. Renie had

married the fiancé of her best friend while the other girl's back was turned.

"Speaking of Blake," Grace said, "you know we go about a lot to first nights—I have enough theatrical connections to get good first-night tickets without much trouble. I wondered—if you'd like to come with us some time?"

"Oh, I'd like to. I'd have to ask Dick, of course. He's being very busy just now. We're old-fashioned. We don't believe in having dates apart from each other."

"You like to keep your eyes on each other," thought Grace, and she recollected that, so far, she had never suspected Blake of having any but afternoon dates with Renie.

"Of course, I meant to include him," she said aloud.

"And you must come up to dinner here some night with Blake and we'll take you to *our* theater."

"That would be—lots of fun."

Grace glanced at Renie and it seemed to her that Renie had taken a swift look at her. Could it be that Dick was jealous and Renie had been reduced to using her, Grace, as a shield for her coquetries with Blake? Nothing could suit Grace better. She didn't mind the coquetries so long as she knew their limitations. She felt somewhat relieved.

She went into Renie's room to fix her hair. Renie followed, talking amiably.

"How nice that you've never cut your hair," she remarked. "I can't imagine you with short hair, any more than I can imagine myself. And you do it up so perfectly!"

"Well, it isn't so good right now," said Grace. "I usually have a bit cut off now and then. I hate any hint of a—door-knob—at the back, don't you?"

"Yes, it could be trimmed," said Renie, with her head to one side. Suddenly she clapped her hands. "Oh, do let me trim it for you! I adore cutting hair. I always cut Nannie's hair and my children's hair. I'm an expert. See, here are the scissors ready to hand. Do let me —just this once."

Grace laughed and submitted, but with a slight anxiety. She was rigidly careful of her hair. It had to be marceled just so and arranged just so. Still—it seemed silly to object. "Please be sure not to cut too much off—just a very little bit." She watched Renie in the glass.

There was one snip, then another. "That's enough," said Grace. "No, it isn't even," declared Renie. Before Grace could stop her there was a third long snip and Renie had cut off a full quarter of the hair. Grace jerked her head away. She went quite white and was on the point of grabbing the shears. Renie stood by, giggling like a naughty child. "Oh, I couldn't stop myself! It struck me what fun it would be to bob it. Do let me bob it, now I've started. Do you know, that's how I bobbed Nannie's hair—she asked me to trim the ends, and before she knew it I had it all cut off. Such a joke on her!"

"It must have been," said Grace, quivering. After a second during which she clenched her hands tight, she gathered the remainder of her hair into a knot. It was difficult, since Grace's hair had not been very long in

the first place. Some of the hairpins would not hold; a few ends straggled.

"Oh, you don't really mind," coaxed Renie. Grace could see her face in the glass. It looked impishly cheerful. "Why, it'll grow in no time. Nannie and I are always playing jokes like that on each other. Just this summer, in the country, I asked her to put a freckle lotion on my face and she spread on some stuff that's supposed to make hair grow! Fortunately, it didn't work —but we laughed over it for ages."

"What a happy family that must be!" thought Grace. The hair stayed up, anyhow. It might have been worse. She tucked on her hat and managed a smile. "Well, it was certainly nearly a joke on me," she said, in a tone that tried to be tolerant but kept a residue of crispness. She was, in fact, almost scared, and so nervous that she could not bear Renie another moment.

The latter showered her with expressions of penitence. "I never thought you'd mind so much. I can't resist a practical joke—it's an inane trait, I know. Do let me—— Oh, a Spanish comb would be stunning on you—with your eyes. I have a gorgeous one presented to me by an admirer, and, as often happens with the presents of admirers, I have no use for it. If you can wear it . . ."

Grace departed with the Spanish comb, with a promise to come to dinner soon and a disturbed sense of being obliged to defend herself against unfamiliar weapons. Women weren't supposed to be cats these days, to fight with rapiers and jeweled daggers and artfully curved knives, not to mention delicate claws—obsolete weapons

all and so much more flexible and treacherous than the blunt pistol. Think of trying to ruin your opponent's hair or her complexion—for she felt almost certain it was with deliberate malice Renie had used the scissors. It wasn't done, it wasn't modern!

Dusk had already fallen. It was foggy, windy, drizzling, and Grace started for home. When she reached the Sixth Avenue El, however, she changed her mind and continued to Broadway. Letty had just moved to a larger apartment a few blocks away, for she was expecting a child. There would be a story to tell Letty—and Blake, too.

She was cheered by the lights on Broadway. It was not indeed like the forest fire of clustered electrics that burned farther down, shedding, on clear nights, a haze like smoke over the sky for blocks around. The lights here were small, farther apart; they fell like a shower of golden raindrops through the mist.

Now that danger was past, she even began to see the humor of Renie's ways of warfare. She did not blame Renie for a flirtation which seemed to be mostly an idle test of skill—for Renie, she judged, had no idea of chancing the throw of so solid a bonnet as Dick Harrington over any windmills. It was often fun to test one's skill. She did it herself, and if she, why not Renie? Time was when she would have trembled with jealousy at Blake's slightest concurrence. But why should she tremble now? After all, she could concur, too, if she liked. As one possessing some of the qualities at least which made for victory, why should she ever be afraid? She wouldn't be. She wasn't. Let it be always open

season, good hunting for all! Let the defeated, those who were not strong enough, those who were too squeamish, plead for quarter, balk at the game, struggle to change.

It was merely that she disliked women who did not rule their own closed seasons—a type like Renie, for instance, for whom much of the interest in an affair lay in the ability to harass some other woman by it. It was a type that never trusted others of its sex; no wonder, when it wasn't to be trusted itself! She, Grace, would not knowingly engage in a flirtation which meant nothing to herself but which caused anguish to another girl. All that other had to do was to ask her to stop.

Of course, if there were some strong compulsion, such as there had been with Blake—that was beyond blame as it was beyond reason. People might say she had taken a man away from his wife, but it had been through neither careless experiment nor selfish plan. She had been compelled to do so—if indeed she had taken that which had been just as strongly impelled to go. And she had risked herself, had taken every chance; to be an "other woman" she had made sacrifices. She remembered sitting in Schrafft's one day with Ruth, among matrons who wore diamond engagement rings and diamond-encrusted wedding rings as they ate whipped-cream lunches between shopping and the matinée. She and Ruth had to choose more by the prices on the right side of the menu than by the dishes on the left. And Ruth said, as they were skipping dessert ("just two cups of coffee, please")—Ruth said, with a sweep of

her hand over the fur-coated, diamond-encrusted mélange, "Pity the poor wives, Grace! Not a diamond between us and we're these terrible other women!" Then she and Ruth had to rush back to their jobs. Jobs bore watching; it was easy to lose jobs. And they had no one but themselves to rely on. Not laws. Not lovers. Certainly not Blake! It was his wife whom Blake felt obligated to shield, his wife whom he permitted to rely on him. She, Grace, was his equal in love, and equals bear their own responsibilities without so much as a complaint, let alone a desire to share their burdens.

She did not mind exactly—but so many of the responsibilities had sprung from or were accentuated by Blake. Ma was on the rampage again—Grace had believed that bringing Blake to dinner now and then would cause Ma to subside. But she complained that Grace stayed away too many nights. "Yes! And if Jerry didn't have his blonde momma, I'd stay away oftener," thought Grace defiantly. The solution was an apartment of her own—another responsibility. She had almost induced Anita to share it. Anita ought to have a place in which to receive Dennis. He was worth annexing. There was a good deal lacking in him but, as Grace had told Anita, "You can't have everything. Personally, I would dispense with a lot in a man for the sake of a little charm." Yet Anita was so obstinate, so childish in some respects; she could plan and at the same time she was just as likely to disrupt all plans by a moment of inopportune revolt. Grace had offered to collect furniture from among her friends; she had offered to bear

the larger share of expenses. She would have to, since Anita earned so much less.

Money, money, all this meant money! So much money for Ma instead of board, so much money for surroundings, so much for attractive clothes. Fatal to have a lover ashamed of one's background or one's appearance. And that led back to the job. If she lost her job—a slip would do it—so much of the structure so carefully raised would topple. Money. Job. Blake. Anita. Ma. As she walked, the words lost sense, threshing back and forth in her mind.

At Seventy-second Street she had to pause for the traffic to skid by. The wind from the west slapped her skirt and the damp girdled her as with a moist, penetrating arm. The windows of the farther buildings were glittering scratches, straight up and down and across mist, hieroglyphs drawn finely and exactly and meaninglessly in space. It was like being on board ship—the wind beating about one's head, the air swished with boos and restless with squeals from the boats. How small this little island squeezed up out of the water—east, west, below, beyond, on all sides, rising and tossing and throbbing and falling—no repose anywhere—one vast, moaning, mixed-up flux.

At length the traffic stopped and she went on, perilously clutching the bit of driftwood which was the pavement with little tentacles of high heels.

CHAPTER NINE

Not long afterward a situation in the M. A. N. office began to monopolize Grace's conversations with her most intimate friends. "You know—how—I worry," was the prefix they had learned to recognize when she was determined to make them share her troubles. And Grace was worried.

A man named Graves had arrived from the coast by order of Mr. Meiselson, who was president of the M. A. N. Mr. Graves had distinguished himself, as everyone knew, by being the only sober press agent at a luncheon for a women's committee in the coast studio. This was his reward. He came East bearing the title of supervisor of both the New York and the Hollywood publicity offices. Roy Williams had always understood that this was his position; now Graves became suddenly

his superior. Everyone saw how it would go. The M. A. N. was never satisfied merely to fire; it liked to prepare its victims for firing. First Roy Williams had been denuded of his title; by spring his private office had been taken away from him and turned over to Graves. While he was still deciding whether, for the sake of prestige, it would not be best to resign, his duties were being snatched from him one by one; soon his very typewriter itself would vanish, and finally his salary.

Small whirlpools of disquiet, expansions of the central whirlpool, swirled about each of the desks in the outer room. Each wondered who would be sucked in and who would be left. Grace had been favored so much by Roy Williams that she feared she would be counted among his retainers, and it is well known what happens to the friends of the old régime when the new assumes power. She tried hard to maintain her neutrality, being docile and sympathetic with Roy Williams; pliant, serious, and intelligent with Mr. Graves.

Her attitude seemed to work. Graves did not like Mr. Colton, who handled the daily newspapers and fan magazines. When it came time to herald the arrival of a newly risen star he ignored Colton, to whom the job properly belonged, detached Roger Darray from the press books and Grace from her women's features, and assigned them both to Nola Winter.

Nola Winter was a fledgling star, still warm from the incubator. The Broadway opening of her latest picture and her rumored engagement to a famous movie actor had given the M. A. N. sufficient warrant to send

her on her first trip East. She was traveling in style, chaperoned, groomed, and stateroomed, to be housed at the Ritz, to be wined and dined and properly introduced to the fan writers, i. e., the public. Mr. Graves himself had caught an earlier train to meet the Twentieth Century and ride down with her. It was the first important effort that had been required of him in New York—a trial of himself as well as of Grace and Roger Darray.

With his last-minute instructions still buzzing in their ears, Grace and Roger walked over to Grand Central. The pavements were caked with summer heat. Underneath a topcoat of somnolence, the air burned with a peculiar, needlelike brilliance. Ordinarily they would have been placid; little could go wrong in a routine arrangement like this. The New York public, represented by the city editors, was as anxious to hear from a pretty new movie actress who might be engaged to Adam Jennifer as Nola Winter was to be heard from. They could be almost certain of making the afternoon papers—with pictures—and all one needed to attract a joyful greeting crowd in a station was a group of cameras. However, even the countenance of Roger, a blank and solemn individual, reflected the tremors of excitement with which Mr. Graves had infected them.

"I hope he doesn't—expect us to meet her waving aloft the keys of the city, the way they do in California," said Grace nervously.

Roger attempted a polite answer which trailed off into murmurs. He kept a slight space between them,

while at crossings he gave a start, touched her elbow with his hand, then hastily released it. Grace could barely repress a smirk, thinking of how afraid of her and embarrassed with her Roger Darray always was. She had once tried to attach him, just before his marriage—not very urgently, to be sure, but so as to keep her hand in—and he had never forgotten how nearly, according to Grace, he had "fallen" for her. He always gave her the impression of restraining himself from "falling" even now, a fact which added to her complacent amusement.

They found one cub reporter lounging at the gate with his press card nonchalantly stuck in the band of his hat. More appeared within the interval—all they hoped for: a couple of newspapermen in the twisted soft hats that seem best to conform to the reportorial head; a girl whom Grace knew, wearing spectacles and carrying a book into which, detaching herself from the proceedings, she at once plunged; photographers, a raft of them, bristling with the legs of cameras, some with their caps reversed so that the visors slouched on the napes of their necks. Grace saw with satisfaction that, apart from the groups of welcoming friends who stared at them curiously, growing numbers of people paused in their business and, as if under a spell, without reason or real desire of their own, moved closer and closer to the cameras, stopping now and then, turning away, then moving closer and standing, after the manner of their kind, with mouths slightly agape in an attitude of unalterably patient, of mesmerized attention.

As the train came in the stragglers pressed forward

upon the flanks of the newspaper party; the latter crushed against, then passed, the gate, while a few station employees thrust out their arms to bar the crowd. In spite of themselves, other people's welcoming friends and the inquisitive bystanders merged, formed a solid, sweating phalanx around the gate. An impressive greeting to Nola Winter!

The platform was all at once black with scurrying figures, porters, trucks of baggage.

Gradually a few spaces of gray stone floor were left visible between feet. The spaces cleared. They widened. They expanded.

"Y'know what stateroom this baby is in?" demanded one of the photographers.

Grace asked Roger. Mr. Graves had neglected to give them the numbers of the car and the stateroom.

"Oh, she'll be along soon. Sure. Sure. Pretty soon," said Roger.

The length of the platform stretched forth longer and longer, duller and duller, barer and barer. It was dark, even damp, but with a density, a monotony of heat which was unendurable. Far at the other end antlike creatures were still hastening through the gate.

The reporters waited in boredom. The newspaper girl, with some aid from the photographers, climbed upon a baggage truck, fanned herself, and swung her legs. "Are you sure she's on this train?" she said suspiciously.

Grace and Roger consulted.

"Perhaps she's missed it or something," said Grace.

"She'd have wired Graves," said Roger. "No. She

must be on it. Probably just fixing up—just fixing up."

One of the sections backed off, backed forward. Grace suggested: "Don't you think—it would be wise —to go through the cars?"

Roger's face was grave. "He must know we're waiting," he said. "He did say Grand Central, didn't he? Might have been a mistake there."

They stood looking at each other, Grace with enlarged, troubled eyes, Roger stiff and pale. The platform was wholly empty now. An occasional employee passed, was questioned, shook his head and went away. They had been waiting nearly an hour. Each of the reporters had gone off to telephone and had disappeared. The photographers gave it up, too, and left one by one, gathering up their cameras and mumbling indifferent curses.

"We'd better go back to the office," said Grace finally.

They returned slowly down the endless length of the platform, still gluing their eyes to the train. A sound of movement caused them to turn their heads. Down the steps of a car close to where they had waited so long, a short man in a neat gray suit was ushering two ladies. It was Mr. Graves.

They halted transfixed. "What in the hell!" said Roger very quietly. They exchanged a quick glance and, bracing themselves, hurried back along the platform. Nola Winter and her mother stood withdrawn, with delicately sniffing nostrils, affecting a self-absorption which did not quite come off, observing in sidelong looks, while Mr. Graves received his press agents.

"Where were you?" he addressed Roger.

"Right here," said Roger rigidly.

"You were right here!" repeated Mr. Graves in a strangled voice. He was silent for a few moments, during which he glared at Roger. "Miss Winter and her mother and I," he said, "have been waiting for you fully an hour."

"Where?" said Roger reasonably.

"Where? Where?" burst forth Mr. Graves. "Why, in Miss Winter's stateroom, of course!"

A flash lighted Roger's pale blue eyes; he opened his mouth. Next instant his face was inscrutable.

"We were waiting on the platform with reporters and photographers," he said quietly.

"Why the—— didn't you bring them to the stateroom, then? Where d'y' think Miss Winter would receive them?"

"On the platform," said Roger calmly. "Photographers can't set up their cameras in staterooms. And," he added, as an afterthought, "you didn't tell us the number of the car."

"Why'n't you look for it, then? Why'n't you find it?"

Roger made no reply.

A colored maid hovered over the car steps, stacking hand luggage.

"You can go back to the office," said Mr. Graves to Roger. "I'll see you later."

Roger swung on his heel and sauntered off.

Grace was white to the lips.

"Do you—need me, Mr. Graves?" she managed to stammer.

He then took notice of her for the first time. He reflected, allowing himself a space for recovery. Nodding at her, he said in a voice still sharp, "Yes. You might as well meet Miss Winter and her mother. You'll be handling her alone now."

Miss Winter was a fragile, languid young girl under a large hat. She bent her head slightly to Grace. Her mother was by turns more condescending and more plaintive. She shook Grace's hand and complained, "We didn't expect to be received like this." Apparently Mr. Graves had not quite mollified them.

Grace moved her deep eyes from Mr. Graves to Mrs. Winter. "Don't you think," she began tentatively, "it will be—better—really to have Miss Winter interviewed at her—hotel? It will be—less wearing for her—perhaps. I could—arrange it very shortly."

"Oh, not to-day," put in Miss Winter. "I'm fah too ti-erd."

"The poor child *is* tired. There's a porter now, honey. No, Nola must stay in bed to-day," said her mother.

"We'll have to let it go to-day," said Mr. Graves authoritatively.

Grace accompanied them to the taxi, conferring with Mr. Graves. Nola Winter had a luncheon with the fan writers next day. "We'll ask the reporters, too," said Mr. Graves. Grace agreed. At the same time she insinuated that they would perhaps get double publicity by keeping the reporters and the fan writers separate. Privately, she thought Mr. Graves didn't know his business. The reporters would write without being fed, while fan writers required to be fed. In a case like

this, where there was the question of an engagement, they might easily get two sets of stories. Since she would be held responsible for the amount of publicity they received or didn't receive, she had to take the trouble to guide Mr. Graves's footsteps. It was decided that Miss Winter's official arrival, for the benefit of the press, would take place to-morrow and the luncheon for the fan writers would be postponed a day. She arranged with mother and daughter to call on them early next morning, bade them pleasant good-byes.

With a great sigh of relief, she headed for the office. Roger Darray's goose was cooked. But not hers—not yet. She was safe.

Roger was sitting by Mr. Colton's desk, smoking cigarettes and recounting their mishap. He had no further need of caution. He knew he would be fired. The whole office knew it. He called to Grace, "How'd you come out?"

Grace approached slowly. "He told me to—handle her alone. I'm—sorry, Roger." She fixed her huge, distressed eyes upon him. She was sorry, very. The loss of a job—especially through no fault of one's own—was a misery completely comprehensible to her. It was a danger which they all shared; her turn might come next.

"I'm—sorry," she said again unhappily. But what could she do?

"It's all right—all right. I guess I'm out," said Roger, without malice.

Colton, who suspected that he also would soon be out, made a helpless grimace and shrugged. "The — —!"

he remarked. "So he thought Nola Winter ought to receive reporters and photographers in her stateroom! That's what you gotta take off these bastards who come up from office boys. A hell of a lot they know about this game!"

"What are—your plans, Roger?" asked Grace low.

"Oh, I'll get along. Yes. Yes. I'll get something."

For several minutes they discussed Roger's prospects, jobs they had heard of, openings there might be.

Then Grace returned to her desk and picked up her telephone—it is one of the characteristics of press agents that they are never without a series of phone calls to make. She could not afford to waste any more time on condolences. The Three Cheers Club met at one o'clock and several of her personal plans revolved around it.

CHAPTER TEN

LIKE others who belonged to it, Grace was wont to excuse herself for attending the weekly luncheons of the Three Cheers Club on the ground that it was good business. One made contacts there. One exchanged the gossip of the day. The club ate in a private dining room at a Park Avenue hotel. This noon, as Grace walked into the small antechamber where the members were gathering, her face was strained with resolution. The girl she searched for stood in a corner, a large bouncing girl, visible and audible. Grace marched up to her.

"How are you, Madge?" she said, widening her eyes and spacing her words with an acute gentleness. "I hear —you had—quite a discussion—about me at your house one night."

The buxom girl stepped back. "Why, no!" she said. "Why, Grace, I hope you don't think I'd say anything unkind about you or let anyone in my house say a word against you."

Grace looked at her with a sweet, unbelieving smile.

"Why, no, Grace," she repeated in alarm under that smile. "I don't know what you heard but I give you my word all that happened was—we were discussing a lot of things and someone remarked wasn't it a coincidence that Grace Kline's friend had the same name as the man who used to be married to a college classmate, Edith Woolever, in St. Louis. Honestly that's every word that was said."

Wearing the same sweet smile and continuing to fix Madge with her eyes, Grace replied, "Then perhaps it might—interest you to know—that he not only used to be married to Edith Woolever, but still is." She swept past.

An "oh" dropped from Madge's lips and she babbled after Grace scared phrases at random: ". . . think the world and all of you . . . wouldn't want you to think otherwise."

Grace betook herself to the shelter of one of her friends who had witnessed the encounter. Her skin was white but under it the blood burned in her cheeks. She removed a glove and tried to soothe them with chilly hands.

"I think I've stopped *her,*" she said. She continued conversationally, halting now and then for composure. "I've discovered a swell method, Jeannette, of dealing with people who talk about you. You just walk up to

them very sweet and ruthless and naïve and ask them did they *really* say that? It frightens them to death."

Her friend, a little woman like a little bird, teetering on very tiny feet and very high heels, patted her arm with a sympathy that was none the less for being highly spiced with curiosity. She herself was a tactful, orderly little soul, a good manager, but she was very broad-minded, as she often told people, and regarded Grace with an admiring and interested wonder. "I wouldn't have told you if I'd known it would upset you so," she said in real concern.

"Oh, it doesn't upset me any more," said Grace. "I'm getting hardened."

After a moment she remembered what else had brought her to the club.

"You know Mrs. Whitten, don't you?" she said, now quite alert. "Introduce me, will you? I'd like to sit next to her—if it can be arranged."

"Of course, dear. Why? Have you anything in mind for her? I didn't know you were writing."

"Oh, it's—just an idea," said Grace vaguely. Her eyes wandered afresh over the room, choosing friends, recording herself again on the minds of those she knew, and permitting them to record themselves on her mind; seeing who was present and who was not.

The girls (not women, but distinctly girls) disposed themselves at three long tables arranged in the form of an ell. Originally the Three Cheers Club had unfurled its banner with a provision that members be self-supporting and a dedication of encouragement to "women of all professions." But it had become increas-

ingly difficult to judge the exact extent of their self-support and, though there might have been members of other professions, they went unnoticed. Nearly all these women (so distinctly girls) acted, wrote, drew, sang, clutched the skirts of the various arts in varying capacities and with varying success and took much credit to themselves for so doing.

Grace usually sat by Diana Reece in her own coterie that formed one of the groups within the group. Today she found herself in a somewhat different atmosphere between Mrs. Whitten and Jeannette Croak, looking attentively across the table at a woman who bore well the dignity of black crêpe de chine and pearl earrings. She was Rachel Dorf, the one who got two thousand dollars a short story. And how well she knew it, thought Grace, with a certain detachment in consequence of her own slight acquaintance in this circle. The two thousand dollars was apparent in every costly fold of silk, in the full, massaged texture of her authoritative face, in the commanding movements of her thick, white hands. She and Mrs. Whitten were discussing short-story prices. Grace listened with a perfect demeanor, a blend between that of a novice hearkening to elders and that of a personage incognito, secure in his own secret status. The glow shed by her skin and eyes, like the soft, swooning light shed by the moon, the delicate synthesis of her clothes drew involuntary glances from Mrs. Dorf and Mrs. Whitten. Each had noticed her in the past and remembered her and would remember her, wondering why. When she spoke each looked at her, following the motions of her long, tender

lips and her widening eyes, following each word dropped after her curious pauses, as if these might furnish the clue to that glowing mystery which her eyes and her skin had the power to suggest. Mrs. Dorf was the first to turn her glances away, chafing under the spell. When Grace spoke she would attempt instinctively to interrupt, only to hear the low, penetrating contralto superimpose itself on her voice without effort, continue, and finish the sentence which Grace had begun.

Mrs. Whitten, who was a small, dowdy person dressed in brown, with generous brown eyes, frankly allowed herself to be engrossed by Grace. It gave her pleasure to watch Grace. She answered her warmly, assuring her that it would be a good idea to do a story about the movie star, Carolyn Hale.

"I thought," said Grace, "since she had made—such a hit in comedy, it might be interesting to get her to talk on the feminine sense of humor."

"N-no," said Mrs. Whitten thoughtfully. "That's a little too—too—intellectual, I believe, for our readers. Something more personal is what they would like—for instance, Love: 'What I Think of Love.' Or perhaps, 'Why I Have Never Married,' if you can get her to sign it."

Grace looked at Mrs. Whitten with a smile. "Isn't that—a little obvious?" she hinted. "After all——"

"Yes. After all, everyone knows why she hasn't married. She finds it more profitable the other way," finished Mrs. Whitten, sharing Grace's amusement. "But an article on Love, if you can get her to sign it, would go, I think. Of course, I haven't the final say."

"Oh, I can get her to sign it," said Grace, and sniggered within herself. She had her own opinion of what Carolyn Hale thought of Love. Becoming serious, she said intently, "Then—if I get it written—shall I bring it in to you?"

"Yes, indeed. It's a good idea."

The luncheon was rapidly climbing to its predestined heights. The president rapped for order; the bubbles of chatter evaporated and the real business of the session began. She started to announce the announcements. Grace was sure that this president, a matronly girl, who conducted an Advice to the Lovelorn column, could hardly wait to breathe her touching sentiments, with a little comical twist at the end, anent the arrivals of new babies to club members. Perhaps she even practised before a glass so as to obtain the exact cloying simper with which these sentiments emerged from her lips. At this point, Anita, who had once been present at a luncheon, had caused a hushed commotion of disapproval by shifting, in her agony, tapping her plate, shuffling her feet, overturning her water glass, and muttering comments to Grace. Anita was far too impatient. As for Grace, she sat in ladylike calm, as others did about the tables, only permitting herself a small smile when she caught Dee's eye.

"And, girls, I have a *great* surprise for you. Mary Covill. Can you guess? Yes, girls, she's been married for *two* months, and the lucky man's name you will all like to know is Howard Higgins, in the advertising business. So now Mary can add the Lucy Stone League to her list of clubs."

Laughter and applause and a general turning of heads toward where Mary Covill sat, somewhat flushed but triumphant.

Grace noticed that Mrs. Dorf and Mrs. Whitten and Jeannette were all applauding quite seriously. Dee sent her an ironic wink across tables. But Dee was patting her hands too. She made one or two perfunctory claps.

The president had not yet done. She took another sheet of paper from her table. She grew sober.

"Now girls," she said, "before I introduce the guests of honor, who to-day are Mr. and Mrs. Reuben Barnes, the big-game hunters, of whom you have all heard [applause], I am sure you will all be interested to know what your co-members have been accomplishing."

She cleared her throat. She said, "I don't want to boast, girls, but I thought you'd all be pleased to know that your president has at last entered—oh, very timidly, you may be sure—the Halls of the Bards. Your president has had a poem accepted by *Home Life!*" (Applause).

She called prettily through the applause, "Yes, and if you don't like it, you have only the editor of *Home Life* to blame. He assures me it's fine!"

After the excitement had bubbled down there followed a list of stories sold, sketches placed, designs ordered, jobs changed. The president sat down, releasing a swarm of chatter.

Immediately she bounced up again. She raised one hand for silence. "There has just come to my hand," she said impressively, "a belated announcement which I am sure you will want to have repeated at once. Girls,

Bessie Firestone has—just—sold—her first short story —to *True Stories!*"

The guests of honor had been brought by their press agent. Grace was among the first to escape. Meeting Dee in the anteroom, she agreed that the club was growing "more terrible by the minute," and listened to a collection of fresh gossip, while her eyes followed the people she wished to speak with presently. They arranged to sit together at the next luncheon.

Afterward she taxied across town to the Algonquin and, making her way through the patronizing groups in the lobby, she reconnoitered over the ropes of the small dining room. It was easy to pick out Carolyn Hale from among all the sleekly hatted women. For the sake of her public, which was accustomed to see her curls unbound in the dramatic sequences, Carolyn Hale had not yet dared to cut her hair. It was really golden and really heavy. Great braided loops of it weighted her head so much that she was always removing her hat. So lovely a girl on the screen, so frail and wistful, she looked extraordinarily matter-of-fact in real life. The Publicity Department stressed the point that she made her own clothes. After seeing them, Grace thought this likely but saw no reason for pride. She had been in attendance on Carolyn for several weeks, arranging appointments for her with the fan writers, taking Carolyn to teas and luncheons, and ingratiating herself with Carolyn in many ways. They now called each other by their first names.

Carolyn Hale was lunching with her "girl friend,"

another movie actress, a study in ebony, sepia, and scarlet beside Carolyn's fairness. Pushing a chair out for Grace, she continued to regale them with an account of an afternoon spent with L. L. Farissey. It seemed that he had swept her from auctions of antiques to auctions of pictures to auctions of manuscripts, she "standing on my feet and perishing from my corns—you can imagine. And that damned old furniture, you ought to see it. What anybody wants to buy the stuff for! I just touched a table and I give you my word it jumped apart! And those pictures! They're enough to give anyone the willies! And here I had to get blue in the face admiring all that junk. When I got home I swear my mouth was sore from making ohs.

"And I was out all night," she wailed, "and I had to shop all morning—and now I have to go see L. L. again. I bet he drags me to more junk shops this afternoon. Oh, my Gawd! Girls, come on along with me. I can't see that big bozo alone again; last night was enough."

Stepping from the cloistered dimness of the Algonquin, they straightway entered the luxuriant dimness of Carolyn Hale's limousine, while she wailed comically and did imitations of L. L. She had a strange voice to come from a creature so heavenly on the screen—thin, flat, nasal. It made one want to laugh in her face at its incongruity.

The moment did not seem propitious to speak of Love, but Grace managed to ask if Carolyn would sign an article for a woman's magazine.

"Sure, I'll sign anything you say," declared Carolyn.

"That would be swell. Only just don't mention names. I gotta think of my Goddamn public."

Her friend, Lily, inquired with interest what the article would be about.

"It's to be called, 'What I Think of Love,' " said Grace hesitantly. But neither appeared to notice any untoward significance.

Carolyn nodded. "That'll be fine," she said. "The fans will eat that up."

And, "I wish my press agent would put something like that over for me," remarked Lily. "I sometimes wonder if he's any good. I notice you're getting so *much* for Carolyn."

"Oh, yes, Grace is swell," said Carolyn generously.

Lily was a free lance who earned a great deal and no doubt paid well for publicity services. But Grace thought it best to keep silent and let Lily make her own comparisons.

In a great pink and gilt room in a great pink and gilt hotel they found the great man, L. L. Farissey. He was an automobile magnate who had got into so many front-page scrapes that it was impossible not to have heard of him. He was assisting Carolyn Hale to maintain her position at that special moment in her career.

Fat and tousled, he sat in a suit of fiercely striped pajamas in a mild pink armchair, looking ill-tempered and eating a meal of sauerkraut, frankfurters, olives, cheese, and tomatoes. The three girls stood astounded at this meal. Raising small bloodshot eyes, the great man glanced at them and grunted. He knew Lily and disregarded her. Being introduced to Grace, he grunted

and disregarded her also. He muttered to Carolyn Hale in a surly voice, "Havin' my breakfast. Want some?"

"Oh, L. L. I've just had an *enormous* lunch," pleaded Carolyn.

He grunted. His silence became stony.

Lily and Grace took chairs by the door and remained quiet, quiet as little mice, not daring to look at each other and trying not to look at Carolyn Hale. She had perched herself on the arm of the great man's chair. Whenever she caught their glances she opened her mouth and gawped without sound and rolled her eyes over the great man's shoulder. For her pains with him, she received a series of grunts.

Finally, leaning her face close to his, she said meekly, "L. L., could Carolyn have one of these lovely little teeny-weeny olives? Just *one* little teeny-weeny olive?"

"Have 'em all!" mumbled the great man magnificently. He took a plate and piled it high with olives, sauerkraut, tomatoes. "Bet' have some cheese—" "Well then, I will have a little, teeny-weeny piece. It looks so good." He added a hunk of cheese. Over his shoulder Carolyn put her hand to her heart and made a huge gawp with her mouth and rolled her eyes in extreme despair. She began to pick at the food, now and then glancing at the two girls and going through the motions of inaudible signs. The great man's frown seemed to be moderating. Carolyn, peering around at him, signaled such an enormous silent gawp of relief behind him that the two girls thought she would fall backward off the chair.

She leaned her face closer to his. "L. L.," she coaxed,

"couldn't we go to see that *lovely* picture again this afternoon? You know, the beautiful, beautiful one that Carolyn liked so much, the one with the woman on horseback and all the lovely dogs?"

"Hm. Worst one of the whole collection!" grumbled the great man. But his face had relaxed into some semblance of pleasure.

"Might take a look in the Bitterman Galleries," he murmured, as if to himself.

Behind his bent head Carolyn raised her hands and twirled her fingers in the air and let her chin fall and her mouth droop to resemble the aspect of a half-wit. The two girls simultaneously took out their handkerchiefs, patted their noses, and hid their giggles.

Carolyn winked and nodded at them and pointed to the door. They understood. They rose and said farewells which the great man did not acknowledge.

Out in the lobby Grace at once found her way to a telephone booth. She had been on the trail of Susanna Beddes all morning. It was most important that Susanna Beddes should be notified of the lunch for Nola Winter and should promise to attend. She was a personage. She wrote a widely syndicated motion-picture column. Press agents might mimic Susanna Beddes' coy habit of speaking of herself in the third person ("Susanna is feeling thus and so"—"Susanna is doing this and that"—"Susanna is very busy just now") but in her presence they trembled. At least, Susanna did everything in her power to cause them to tremble. Grace finally traced Susanna to her home.

"Oh, Susanna has *such* a headache to-day," she

moaned over the telephone. "Don't speak to Susanna about business! She's desperate."

A lengthy conversation followed, soothing, apologetic, consoling on Grace's part, bored and reluctant on Susanna's. Susanna really could not think. Susanna really did not know what engagements she had. Susanna did not care about these group interviews. She preferred tête-à-têtes.

"Oh, I'm certain—Miss Winter would be delighted to have you take lunch with her," Grace assured her. "I was—just about to ask you. But we—would like you to be present at the formal reception too."

Susanna said that she would see.

"Shall I—call you at the office then—to-morrow?"

Susanna said that she might do so.

Grace had spent almost half an hour in the stifling booth. She staggered into the pink and gilt lobby, rested for a few minutes, inhaled a few pink and gilt breaths. She supposed it might be good policy to send Susanna Beddes flowers—from the M. A. N.—or some such touching recognition of her headache.

When Grace at last stepped out of the hotel she paused, startled, she could not say why, to see the sky so blue. A faint breeze stirred the blazing, dust-moted air. The interiors of the serene shops along Madison Avenue looked limpid as water to a parched throat. A great breath melted in her lungs and gave a special luster to her face. A trolley clattered by with open sides. The tops of all the taxis were down; their black upholsteries glistened between smears of dust. The heat-

heavy sidewalks bloomed here and there unexpectedly with the dresses of girls, yellow silks and green silks, and rose and lavender, slimly conforming to their bodies. Of course. It was summer, a season that she loved, and the middle of the afternoon.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ANITA'S office, a free employment bureau, closed early, so that she was always the first to return to the apartment which she and Grace now shared. It stood on the same street as Dee's old studio, and at this time of the afternoon, in the lull between the exodus from shops and offices and the re-migration to restaurants and theaters, it greeted Anita with a soothing fragrance of quiet. She threw herself down on the couch. The odds and ends of gray, home-painted furniture were spotted with lingering sunshine; one pale beam lay across the bookcase; an orange vase shone. She was sure of perhaps half an hour of utter peace.

Thereafter the telephone began to squeal. The early calls were always for Grace. Then there would be a short interval. Finally, always to Anita with the force of sur-

prise, the tone of Dennis Meloney's "Hul-lo," long-drawn and resonant, warm and vague, drifted through the telephone.

Anita said, as always, "Is—this—you, Dennis?"

He answered reassuringly, as always, the words resounding through his nose, "None other!"

"Sober?"

"Very!" said Dennis, with too much conviction. He added, "I'll be right over."

As she knew from experience, this might well mean several hours later. It was one of the phrases which Dennis used to assert his complete spiritual willingness behind which the uncontrollable body lagged under no matter what goads, to his bewilderment, even to his dismay. He had informed Anita, in one of his solemn moments of drunken articulateness, "You'll learn this about me—I'm a terrible liar." Anita had only been able to smile and sigh and shake her head in resignation that had in it a note of noblesse oblige, of staying one's hand as with an inferior in one's power. She was often on the point of not bearing with Dennis any longer. If she had been alone she could have swiftly made up her mind, but with Grace in the background she felt almost as if she were playing before an audience, as if she were constrained to go on with the performance before it though hampered by its presence. Grace, she knew, did not treat her as a poor relation because she "had Dennis." She could almost see the idea behind Grace's mounting intimacy. A girl who could attach even one not wholly undesirable man for that length of time and with that comparative regu-

larity could not be beyond the pale, might even be "one of us." The old formula of contrast, a beautiful girl selecting a colorless girl as companion and foil, is outmoded. Two charming girls, it has been learned, are better than one to attract men.

The telephone rang more and more insistently. Blake called up and left a message. The entry of Grace dispersed the last vestige of solitude.

She searched the room with a wide and tenacious gaze.

"What have you been doing?" she said, and, not waiting for a reply, she launched into an account of her afternoon.

"I don't believe—I'll have any more trouble with Madge Murphy," she concluded. "I can't understand—girls like that! Madge Murphy gets around a lot; she knows a lot of people. I don't see how she does it. She's so homely! She has little, wrinkled, blackish eyes, raisin eyes. She's one of those girls who—stick—out in front and in back and who always, by instinct, sort of, gravitate to stripes, those heavy, long stripes, in purple and red, you know. I suppose they think it makes them look thin! Nothing could make her look thin—not even a steam roller!"

This trick of Grace's of describing people by means of the simplifications of the caricaturist always seemed strange to Anita. How could Grace, who disapproved of Anita's penchant for taking sides, who, though she enjoyed gossip, was always careful to repeat it with impartial omniscience—how could Grace, who was so tolerant, pass such cruel judgments with her eyes and

ears? Anita had learned to be on guard against Grace's descriptions, for when she saw the people herself, they were apt to be so different.

"There are so many girls like that," continued Grace, "that you—meet around. There's *nothing* to them that you can put your finger on. And they take themselves so—*seriously*. But they seem to get along. I suppose it's just push," she added thoughtfully. "They simply—push themselves in everywhere."

She went on: "Anyhow, I've discovered a grand method of dealing with people who talk about you. Hereafter I mean to confront them as I did Madge and ask them straight out, but very—sweetly, you know, did they *really* say that? It's like confronting a murderer with the body of his victim. It works."

"It wouldn't work with me. I'd just answer yes," said Anita coolly. "Besides," she added, "there's danger in that method. It might actually keep people from talking about you."

But Grace didn't mind. That was just Anita's way. "We can't all be little tartars like you," she said amiably.

The deliberate rhythm of her movements as she went about the business of making her toilette and choosing her clothes for the evening could not be ruffled. Each motion was so precise, followed upon every other so perfectly, had such a smooth place in Grace's daily ritual, that Anita could not resist following with her eyes and even with her mind, as one follows involuntarily the rhythm of the hymns and genuflections in a church, the rhythm of the Perpetual Adoration before an altar. Grace was ready to do up her hair when

Dennis appeared. She was still engaged with it when Blake followed him.

Making her entrance through the bedroom door, she stood poised for a moment, in a pale, ocher-colored, georgette dress, the glamorous product at last of all her small, attuned labors. She glanced at Dennis, who was neither entirely drunk nor entirely sober, with a smile of intimate and amused understanding, then turned her eyes to Anita, as if to reassure her that smiles for Dennis must also be smiles for her.

"How—*are* you?" she said gravely, with a slight, coy lift of her brow.

"O. K.," said Dennis. Viewing her luminous harmony with a pleasure that imprinted itself on his face, he found nothing more to say. He retired into the silence which was his only way of being dignified and polite.

Grace passed in front of him and took her place on Blake's lap.

"You ought to be able—to help me out," she said, drawing the great pools of her eyes from Dennis to Anita, then to their final resting place on Blake's countenance. "I have to write a woman's magazine article about Carolyn Hale called, 'What I Think of Love.' "

Blake snickered. "Be sure to spell love with a capital letter. The capitalization of love is very appropriate for Carolyn Hale."

"Are you—punning, Blake, by any chance?"

She secured her attention entirely to him, gazing in his face and beginning for him the motions of her special laugh.

"Punning, Blake, is the lowest form of humor," said Anita.

But neither Grace nor Blake appeared to hear or to be affected. They continued the duet of their particular amusement, while Dennis sat, silent, with a polite grin glued to his mouth and Anita did not smile at all and tapped a foot.

It was Grace who interrupted herself, not having lost track of her plans.

"It's rather—important," she explained. "I'd like to get in with Carolyn. If I can put this over it'll be quite a good stunt for her. It might—give me a start with the magazines. And, on the strength of it, I might —be able to sell Carolyn the idea of making Blake's play into a movie."

She looked questioningly at Blake. Grace was always tactful about injecting herself into Blake's affairs, but Anita couldn't help wondering how much of her interest was a sincere wish to help Blake and how much was a desire to show him that she was no mere hanger-on of his new-found importance, that she and her connections were valuable to him.

He replied by a pleased lift of his brows.

Grace addressed Dennis: "You ought to have some ideas for me, Dennis. You're a press agent yourself."

"I got out a story like that for a fan magazine," offered Dennis after a deep silence. "It's the same old hokum. But it might give you an idea. I could look it up for you."

"That's what they want, the same old hokum," said Blake.

And, "That sounds perfect," declared Grace. "I don't suppose—you care if I—use—some of it."

"O. K.," said Dennis, shrugging.

Grace paused. "You wouldn't like—to come back here after dinner and help me—plan it?" She let each word drop slowly from the edges of her mouth, sweetened with a tentative smile, and glanced at Anita.

"No," said Anita crisply, "we wouldn't like. Are we going to dinner or aren't we? *I'm* starved."

Dennis was about to pick up his hat when Grace asked, "Would you—mind—if I ate with you? Blake has to go to dinner with some man."

"Oh, all right, come along. We're meeting some friends of Dennis's later."

"I have to leave you right after dinner," stated Grace.

It was always like that, Anita thought. Not that she objected to Grace's accompanying them when nothing better turned up—Grace often invited her along, made many kind attempts to include the social life of Anita, with Dennis, in the convolutions of her own. But Anita waited to be asked, while Grace, though it was she who had established the rule that neither should interfere with the other's engagements—Grace took it for granted that she was welcome, unless told otherwise. Anita repeated to herself that she had no right to resent trifles, considering all Grace had done for her.

She looked from her own work-day silk to Grace's clothes of leisure. "I suppose I ought to get dressed."

"No," she said suddenly, "I shan't bother." She walked

into the bedroom to smooth her hair. She couldn't and wouldn't compete. Dennis ought to know by now that she was no beauty alongside of Grace. Besides, what was there to compete for anyhow?

Grace, following on her heels, offered, "You can wear my blue dress."

"Thanks. No."

Grace would not give advice, but she did think Anita was careless. "You ought to get—yourself—some more things," she said, with meaning. "Clothes—are an investment, Anita."

"An investment in what?"

"Well, you needn't be so scornful. Things like that—help."

CHAPTER TWELVE

At two o'clock next morning Anita was riding home alone from Two Hundred and Twentieth Street. Dark houses, like regimented soldiers, stood up straight, then fell before the onslaught of the train. Around her all the drowsy couples were sagging toward each other; heads nodded lower and lower; heads jerked up to a moment of consciousness at each stoppage of the train. She should be angry to be taking this weary subway ride alone at night, yet watching them—watching the even houses, the drowsy couples, the nodding heads —she was flooded with the vast relief of her solitary aliveness; she only felt relief rising like a flag of triumph within her.

She held herself stiller in her seat, so that no movement of hers should flaunt to these people her secret

victory. In that subway train she felt her eyes and her eyes only to be alert with a strange alertness, darting from her moveless self, drawing these people into *her* consciousness, while she herself was alone and apart, content to be so, unreachable by them, unreachable by all, unreachable (and heaven be praised therefore) unreachable even by Dennis. Oh, this was the essence of all victories, the smart of all defeats—there within the grasp of all, to be discovered by all, and ignored by all the drowsy eyes, the nodding heads, the somber houses. She tightened her lips; she would have bit them, feeling as if at any moment a smile would give the concrete signal of the elation soaring in her veins.

All was dark in the city. Broadway lay wan and disordered. The Palace was dark, and the burlesque house was dark. Loungers in the stuffy side streets west of Sixth, about the pallid hotels and down-at-heels houses, made little lights with sudden cigarettes.

Running up the stairs, she was surprised to hear the taps of the typewriter.

"My Gawd!" said Grace, confronting her. "I was about to send the police for you!"

She pointed to the typewritten sheets. "Blake had to work, so I thought I might as well begin that story."

She looked at Anita sharply, "What's got *you* so excited? Where *have* you been anyhow?"

Anita sank into a chair. It had been one of those evenings which seem to traverse many separate periods of time; in moments of awakening, during the transitions, one finds them, much to one's surprise, to be still continuing. This sort of evening is better relished

in retrospect, when the memory with its own inarticulate art is found to have selected and retained only the most diverting incidents. Anita was overcome with accumulated laughter.

They had been at one time in a Chinese restaurant, and there was a sign, guardian of the place's respectability, and it said, "Ladies are requested to dance solely with their own escorts." They had sat at another time in a clandestine German beer garden through whose musty lattices oozed a gentle backyard breeze, and Dennis spoke of the beer picnics of his childhood, how cool had been the first breath of the green branches for which the children waited in the sweating cars, and Mac—this was Dennis's friend—spoke of God and the Devil, and Anita announced, a little drunken with Mac's scared admiration, her lack of concern with either, and Frances—this was Mac's girl—said that she didn't know—there must be something when one considered Nature and she said that she loved flowers.

"So then we went back to Two Hundred and Twentieth Street, where there was a tableful of liquor," said Anita. "And there was a girl and a man on the couch. But Frances took me aside and told me it was all right because the girl was a virgin and the man was a respectable married man and he had eight children. So, at length, the virgin and the married man departed and Dennis took a cold bath and went to sleep and snored and Mac took off his shoes and the radio played, 'My Wild Irish Rose, the sweetest flower that grows,' and Mac and Frances had a long argument about a friend of hers who was trying to get her father into an

old folks' home, and Mac said, 'So that's the kind of a girl you are! You and your girl friend, you'd take an old man away from his kiddies and stow him in some damned old folks' home. If I was a daddy,' he said, 'I'd want to stay right with my kiddies!'

"So then I decided to go home. But Mac wouldn't hear of it because he explained Dennis was out and he was out and I couldn't ride home alone in the subway—'with all those damned mashers around, moving up close to the girls in the trains late at night.' He knew, he said, he'd seen 'em! He said I was to stay, and Frances said I could stay. She said it wasn't every girl she asked to stay; she said once she had had two girls there who, when asked to stay, objected and said, 'Oh, but we're not like Frances!' So she turned them out. But I could stay because she said she could see I wasn't 'that kind of a girl.' By that time I was a little mixed on the subject myself.

"Anyhow, I decided to go. So Dennis woke up and looked at me a long time and shook his head and said, 'You're too idealistic.' So I wanted to know why. So then he said, 'A-aah, yah punkie!' in his nice street-urchin way. 'You're too damn analytical!' Then he told me I had no abandon and I was the dumbest jane he'd ever run across—in fact, I was his dumbest woman. Upon which home truths I sallied forth."

"In Two Hundred and Twentieth Street!" exclaimed Grace. "It's improbable. Look—couldn't we all go up there some night—Blake too—and get a look at them?"

"Well, I'm not exactly running excursions up there," Anita pointed out.

Grace sniggered. "They sound too good to miss. Blake would love them. We must arrange it."

She paused. During a period of silence an expression adjusted itself on her face which warned Anita. She was prepared for the slow fixing of Grace's eyes that slowly turned to her face, for the halting phrases. She might have known Grace had stayed up for a purpose.

"I've had—an exciting time myself," said Grace.

Anita folded her hands. She listened.

"Blake nearly had a fight over me," Grace continued, and stopped to see the effect. If she was disappointed it did not show in the subtle enjoyment about her mouth, nor did it halt the penetrating spaced flow of her confidences. Blake had had to see someone at a theater owned by Trout, a producer whose current musical comedy he had "doctored." "And never thinking," went on Grace, "I was about to—look in back stage. I've been there so many times with Blake. The doorkeeper knows me and was going to—pass me. Then Fred walked up. You know—he's connected with Trout now. I have always told Blake that Fred made a point of being particularly nasty to me but he laid it to my imagination. Well—to-night—he saw for himself. Fred said, 'Don't pass this girl; we can't have everybody's sweeties hanging around.' "

She paused and swallowed nervously. Anita noticed how her face had become strained, her cheeks lengthened, under the narrative. These concrete signs of emotion never failed to exact sympathy from her, no matter how she might try to evade, to look everywhere, to prevent the focusing of her attention.

"I simply stood," went on Grace. Anita could imagine how she had stood, the tragic hugeness of her eyes.

"You know—it's dark there—at the stage door. Neither of us saw Blake. He hissed! He actually did. He drew his face close up to Fred and he said, 'As long as I have any connection with this show, Grace can go in and out here as she damn well pleases, *any* time. D'ye hear that?' He was so *white*. I could see he was ready—to smash his fist into Fred's face. But Fred drew back. As he naturally would. 'Oh, I didn't know Grace was with *you*,' he said. Very honeyed. Scared, too. I dare say he and Blake will not do so much—business together in future."

Anita frowned, wondering what comment she could adequately make. But Grace spared her the necessity.

"I really didn't mind so much," she concluded, "after it was over. It sort of opened things up—gave us a chance to talk. Things have been sliding along so. . . ." She looked to Anita expectantly.

"The divorce?"

"Well—that appears to be still in the distant future," said Grace with reserve.

She paused. But as Anita asked no further questions she at length amended: "It's been—intimated, and I understand it was hinted in reply very coolly that—there might not be so much difficulty about *that* as he thought. But this was quite a while ago. Blake says she's stopped writing."

Anita spoke suddenly what had been on her mind for a long time: "Don't you think, if Blake told her

about you, she'd give the divorce and make an end of it? After all, she seems to be quite decent."

To her surprise, Grace replied with feeling, "Yes. And it's hard on her, too. But Blake seems to be—determined to keep me out of it. He says because of his family—in case—in the future . . . And then—he thinks it would hurt her and there might be a mess. I told him to tell her. If it's for my sake—I don't care about a mess. And if I were she, no matter what it was, I'd rather *know*. Wouldn't you, instead of fighting with shadows? But—he—has his own ideas."

She rose. "Anyhow," she said, shrugging, "nothing can be arranged for the present. She's sick; something wrong with her heart."

Grace began to loosen her hair. Looking at Anita, who sat still where she had been left, she made a slow addition, as if, now that she had taken advantage of a moment so conducive to confidences, she might as well take the fullest advantage and divest herself of the rest of the truth. "I have no—assurance that he'll marry me, you know," she said softly. "He's never actually said so."

She continued with long, calm strokes to brush her hair that vibrated in little electric spasms of light down its fine spread to her shoulders, so that her face, white, hardened, with the chin raised, seemed to be the face of a stone lady surrounded by the strange, quivering life of the hair. She made a tiny movement of her head and shoulders. "That doesn't bother me," she said hardily. "I'm just as likely to—change *my* mind, too." She almost smiled at her reflection in the glass, or rather

pressed her lips together to form an expression that was firm, a little secretive, and a little malicious. "I'm just as much of a person as Blake—just as free to do as I please."

She brushed for a few moments, absorbed in thought. Then, with a sigh, she relaxed into a full shrug. "After all, one can't blame him," she said, indulgent, condoning. "He doesn't want to get involved again—in all that—domesticity." She scanned Anita's face. "I suppose it's that way with Dennis, too," she remarked.

But Anita swiftly stood up. "Don't include me!" she cried. With her hands, she made motions of shoving away, palms toward Grace, head turned sideways.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THAT winter Diana Reece left her husband. She had adopted Letty as bosom friend and often came to Letty's house, smothered in mink, her dark, hot eyes flashing in little torrents of energy above excited cheeks. When she opened her coat she disclosed a new lissomeness sheathed in black satin. "I've lost ten pounds," she announced in her rich voice. Walter liked her thin. Walter was the man she would marry when she had been divorced and he had been divorced. Walter also liked her in subdued dress, and black was Diana Reece's sole notion of a quiet color.

She always seemed to be impressed by the sacrifices she was capable of making for love and was always boasting of them. "The other day he was a little late in calling me. I had a hair dresser's appointment. But I give you my word I couldn't move a step from the

telephone. I was like chained to it until I heard his voice!" With elated conviction her eyes darted from one to another of the group.

Paul rose from the bridge table with the habituated gallantry of the lady's man, to remove her coat.

She thrust forward one satined arm whose wrist was locked in gleaming platinum. "This is what Walter gave me for my birthday." Simultaneously, she curved an index finger loaded with a huge green stone that stuck out of its silver setting. "And this, too."

"A diamond wrist watch," said Grace, admiring, though privately she felt above diamond wrist watches. "How nice of him!"

Blake sneered a little. This sneer was lost in the growing roundness and ruddiness of his face, and there was a faint sense of after-dinner relaxation about his posture, with knees far apart, as if for the stomach to rest between. "A diamond wrist watch is Grace's idea of heaven, isn't it, Grace? She's never got over envying Madalynne's wrist watch, have you, Grace? Jerry won't get over it either for a long time. He's still paying the bill for it while Madalynne sues for breach of promise."

Grace's soft eyes wandered, drawing in sympathy. She said, in a special voice, at once submissive and explanatory, which she often used after some remark of his, "Blake thinks—men who give presents to girls are silly. He thinks because he's never had to, there aren't men who *must*. Otherwise, girls would not even look at them. Or men like Walter who—*like* to give things from sheer generosity."

"Oh, there's no one like Walter for generosity," said Diana warmly. She turned with a new conviction to the company. "He never comes to see me without bringing me something. I don't know what to do with all the candy and flowers. And bath salts! I have tons of bath salts. All men haven't your ideas, Blake, thank the Lord! You get away with murder." Shooting him a look of disapproval from her hot eyes, she sailed into the bedroom.

There was silence. Blake had paled. His mouth had a wry twist, and when Grace spoke to him he would not answer. She spoke again and touched his arm. "After all," she reminded him in an undertone, "it wasn't I who said that." He grimaced impatiently.

As soon as Dee reappeared he took his departure, saying that he must look in at the theater. His second play had just opened, and, in view of the fact that he was to begin a well-earned playwright's vacation the next day, golfing in Florida, he shook hands around the bridge table and kissed Letty good-bye. Pointedly he ignored Diana Reece, and would almost have passed Grace by in his sullen mood if she had permitted it. She followed him out. Through the half-open door were to be heard ensuing murmurs and the final kiss of reconciliation.

"Well!" said Diana Reece with a sigh of mock relief when Grace reëntered. "I didn't really mean to annoy him. But I should say, Grace, that you have him badly trained."

"Yes, she has," agreed Letty from the bridge table. "I'm devoted to Blake. But you should have heard the

things he said about our playing bridge. The next thing, he said, would be for us to get a radio and move to the suburbs and become the perfect Babbitts. But it's all right for Blake to go down South and play golf! People who play golf aren't Babbitts, oh, no! That goes for you, too, Grace. You're always making fun of people who are interested in games. Why don't you laugh at Blake's golf?"

"I do, dearie, I do," said Grace decidedly. "It's not I who play golf, or bridge either. When you see me fighting over cards as you and Paul were fighting a minute ago, then you can crow."

Her eyes and her low, tenacious voice unconsciously concerned themselves with sucking the attention of the others toward herself.

She said pensively and gazed about the circle: "It's funny about Blake, isn't it? He used to—sneer at people who—played golf and fussed with cars. He—wanted to be free of all that—and now, he—rushes away to play golf and even thinks—of buying a car."

And each word sank into the minds of her listeners, impregnating them, despite themselves, even against their wills, irresistibly with her concerns. Their thoughts began to revolve about her chief interest, that now became their chief interest.

"It's because he has money," declared Diana Reece. Almost, her wide, red mouth smacked over the words, especially over the last that so admirably suited her taste.

Grace's shoulders began to curve, her chin to dig into the nook thus made, and her mouth to curl with her

particular amusement. "So Anita says. She says that—so long as he hasn't bought a cane, however, there are still—hopes."

"I don't see what's wrong with a cane," muttered Paul, who always carried one.

"No! You wouldn't!" said Letty, briskly scornful.

Paul remained subdued, in silence. But Harold, studying his cards, mildly attempted to change the subject.

It was at Harold's invitation that Paul had come to play bridge. The clandestine meetings which had given Letty so much pleasure in the past had dwindled to this, that Letty now called him "poor Paul," and it was Harold who felt sorry for him. Seeing Paul look at Letty during the evening, Harold felt as if he were watching some lost but still-remembered part of himself, following vicariously the course of a personal experience, as one may perhaps do in a book, with a vivid recognition of each symptom but no pain. He could only show his sympathy by kindnesses that he hoped would go unnoticed—they did not; there was banter in the crowd about "what good friends Paul and Harold are getting to be"—such as asking for Paul's presence at the bridge table, because Paul was, fortunately, a very good player, and now and then turning aside the shaft of one of Letty's observations.

Formerly, Harold had gone out to play bridge. Letty had jeered at the game. Since the birth of the baby, however, bridge night once a week on the maid's evening out had become an institution. Letty said she was tired of spending the evening alone with Harold and if they had people in there was nothing else to *do*. Only it was

difficult to find partners among their close friends. The Lindens played, but they lived in the suburbs. Grace and Blake contented themselves with sitting on the couch and mocking.

To-night Paul had, at Letty's behest, spent an hour telephoning to his club and among his acquaintances to find a fourth. And they had finally been obliged to commandeer a new admirer of Letty's. By profession he was a teacher of shorthand in a high school, but a youthful tramp journey to Africa had seemed to give him a lien on the words "romance" and "adventure," which he used incessantly. He also wrote sonnets. His given name was Leroy and, being fully sensible of his outward characteristics, the girls called him "li'l Leroy." It was perfect. It satisfied even Grace's keen quality of derisive description. She got any amount of amusement from the phrases he used—"I love to roam; I love to wander"—with a dreamy swaying of the head and swooning of the eyes—and from his habit of using the word "child" when he addressed women, delicately, tenderly, dropping it like a crystal from the heights of Olympus to a well-loved mortal. At the same time she took him quite seriously as an admirer of Letty's and a man with a literary background who wrote sonnets.

It was to li'l Leroy, since the others knew it anyway, that Grace announced she had begun a novel.

She caused the bridge game much strangled irritation by distracting his attention to discuss some incidents of the plot. Harold rose finally, crying that the game might as well be broken up.

"So it might," she agreed with a snigger.

And she and li'l Leroy turned their backs on a wrangle over eighteen cents, which Paul and Letty claimed to have won, to engage in an analysis of the story. It had been begun on the advice of Grace's literary agent, who always instructed tyros to write novels first and short stories afterward, as the latter were then apt to sell for bigger and better prices.

"It's a novel about a girl who—wants to—belong to herself—to be free," Grace informed li'l Leroy.

"*Not* autobiographical!" she emphasized, raising her voice and turning her eyes upon the card table. "The girl is to come from a small town. And she's *not*—to write. I think I'll make her an illustrator."

She paused. Her eyes wandered from face to face, insistent on comment.

Diana, as a professional, felt called upon to ask in a richly derogatory voice, "How would you get the small-town stuff? You never lived in a small town."

"Oh—that will be just—for the opening chapters. Anita is giving me some stuff—and Blake, too. He was brought up in a small town, you know."

"Are you putting Blake in?"

"No, indeed!" said Grace vigorously. She proclaimed: "Blake is *not*—to have—any place at all in this book. I'm making the man—a publicity agent for a movie company. He's to be dark—and to wear glasses. I know everyone'll look for a resemblance—but I defy anyone to find it."

Dee, who was not much in Grace's confidence, having considered her in the past a fool to "waste her time on a married man," now lowered her voice in the

expression of a new alliance. She was learning for herself. "How's the status quo?" she asked, with warm sympathy.

"Oh." Grace drew away and shrugged. "As usual." But she could not resist the lure of Dee's attention and explained, after a pause, "She has heart disease."

Dee rolled her eyes to heaven. "They always develop something! Walter's wife was undecided whether to develop t.b. or cancer, as a matter of pride, you understand—not that she wasn't at bottom quite ready for a divorce herself."

"No. It's heart disease all right," said Grace coldly. She might show a sardonic good sense about the loves of others, but she resisted any effort to undermine the solemnity of her own.

"Then perhaps you won't have to bother. She might die."

"Wives *never* die," declared Letty. "I know. Aren't I a wife? Even if they have cancer they don't die. Look at Ruth's boy friend's wife. She's had cancer for years and *she* won't die."

"As someone says somewhere, 'They only die—in happy marriages,' " quoted Grace. Her eyes fixed themselves on space, taking on their mournful depths. "It's just as well this way, I suppose," she said at length. "I don't see that marriage is any more—happy. Less, in fact."

"What's that you said about Ruth?" queried Dee. "Is his wife still alive? Why, she's had cancer for at least five years—that I remember. I've already lost my faith in God. *Don't* let me lose my faith in cancer," she

implored them, rolling the morsels of words on her tongue and lavishly rolling her heated eyes. "In spite of what you say," she added with fervent decision, "I'm taking no chances. Marriage is very convenient, you have to admit. Walter has it all arranged to go to Mexico. Millard and I are all set for Reno. And we're to meet and marry in California."

"It ought to be a slogan for the tour companies: 'Get divorced and see the world,'" commented Letty.

Dee appreciated the wit of this as well as anyone. She began a racy account of how Millard and she were rehearsing the way he was to strike her (before witnesses) en route to Reno. "He's so afraid to hurt me." To a question, she grew sober in the midst of her radiance, as one might at a party at the mention of a dead comrade.

"Twelve years," she replied gravely. "Mal's very much upset. I'm sorry for him. But what can you *do*?"

And, having remembered to pay this tribute to the dead, she went on with the opulent wit of her recital.

The men said nothing. They were a little shocked by the conversation. Besides, it did not concern them. It dealt with women's matters.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GRACE nearly always went "out" in the evenings. All the girls whom she admitted to equality and who admitted her to equality went "out." It was the basis on which attractiveness and status were judged; it was a rigid convention, a game which one had to play in her sphere under peril of social neglect, just as in some circles it is necessary to play bridge for the same reason.

Thus, Anita, when she came home later than usual, would find her curled up on the couch, horn-rimmed spectacles outlining her enormous eyes, the lamp shining on her book in those November twilights (so like heads just sprinkled with iron gray) as she read intently and chewed hard candy reflectively to the luxurious sound of running bath water. Grace enjoyed books, current ones by preference, since these had the additional

use of keeping her up with current literary talk. If she were going "out" with Blake or the second-best young man of the moment, a dinner or afternoon dress would most often be spread out in the bedroom, as denoting the intimacy rather than the display of the engagement. These second-best young men formed a slow procession that advanced in single file, as it were, each member halting, involving Grace's spare attention for a while, then making way for a successor.

If, however, Grace were just having a "date," the dress would usually be an evening dress, with, beside it, the brocaded, furred cloak that Mrs. Kline, in token of reconciliation, had fashioned out of Grace's old seal-skin. The escorts on such nights were merely pawns in the game of going "out"; were chosen for their utility, the money they had, the places they could take one to, rather than for their charm. And on such nights Grace would stay out exceptionally late, making the most of her chance to be escorted to the new fashionable restaurants and dance places and night clubs. She was not a "drinking woman." Her set did not frequent speakeasies, except from curiosity.

At first it was a source of wonder to Anita how Grace could find sufficient entertainment for so many nights, but she learned that it was very simple really. Grace had no desire to abandon herself to pleasure. She used pleasure for her own purposes. Grace did not seek for conviviality, or for amusement. She only sought to be present. She liked, as a matter of business, to see all the motion pictures that were talked of. Although she relished the theater, she had to see plays also so as to be

able to pass her measured opinions on them. The theater and the movies were vital matters to the people she knew. A large part of their talk was of plays and players, and Grace had a memory for and a store of information about these as perfect and detailed as a boy's memory for the showings of athletic teams.

Between routine work, avocations, and social life, it might be considered difficult to fit in the writing of a novel. But there is always Sunday, when one does not have to go to the office, and when even social life disintegrates. Grace wrote her novel on Sundays. She planned it according to a simple mathematical formula: twenty chapters—twenty Sundays—five months. She applied herself to it with the astute, persistent, and organized vigor which she carried to all her undertakings.

She had not used the depths of intelligence suggested by her beautiful eyes, her clear, grave, deliberate diction, she had not used her assured bearing, her wide circle of acquaintance as well as her concrete accomplishments (some articles on motion pictures printed in large magazines)—she had not used all these to no purpose. They had all helped to "plant the idea," as she said, that she was "a young writer of promise." She was also prominent. She was seen often at luncheon in the places where one should be seen at luncheon, in the Algonquin and later in Sardi's. She was seen at first nights, where she greeted and was greeted. She believed the compliments which important people paid her and, divesting them of any qualifications, repeated what had been said to her in a simplified and exaggerated form.

She had some acquaintance among publishers and

these she arranged for her agent to sound. One she impressed sufficiently with her beauty, her tactful certainty, and her knowledges to extract a contract and an advance from him. It was a good idea, he agreed, to write a novel about a girl who wanted to be "free." The novel about girls who want to be "free" is as hardy a perennial as the novel about newspapermen's adventures among womankind.

Then Grace proclaimed that she was writing a book in every quarter where she had or could get entrée. She knew reviewers, she knew colyumnists, she knew a few critics. She exhibited her loot among her friends. So-and-so would run her picture, and another person had promised to print a preliminary announcement; she had met a critic from Cleveland who would say nice things about it; she knew some bookshop owners who had bound themselves to feature it in their windows. She only hoped the "breaks" would be "right," and that she could establish the beginning of one of those settled and accepted reputations which, from her publicity work, she knew to be so valuable.

On Sundays Grace would put a meaningful question to Anita: "What are—your plans for to-day?" It implied that Anita, according to the original pact, was to keep out of the way as much as possible. If she could not go out, she would sit and read in the bedroom.

Whenever Grace had a free evening, it was also arranged that Anita should make a date and disappear between the hours of seven and twelve. Her dates were nearly always with Dennis. She and Dennis would go to dinner, then to the theater, or, if the cold chanced to be

fine and clear, they would first walk up and down Fifth Avenue.

In the Fifties this street at night has the hush and luxury of deep carpets; the shops amble by and the lovers amble, and the faint lights among the glassed-in treasures seem to amble too. They stopped to gaze in great show windows, shining and magnetically smooth as the smooth backs of cats. They examined the titles of rows and rows of books. They stood long before pictures. Fifth Avenue would be growing stiller. All nevertheless would be throbbing softly, thrumming steadily with the steady flow of the motor cars, echoing the powerful note that lower down and one street west pulsed so insistently, struck so heavily, pounded hard and loud on the ear, while roundabout new buildings bloomed like great white roses in the sky and the lights of towers and windows chanted their golden melody in all shades, from amber to topaz, from pearl to copper color, and the excitement of all was overwhelming. Oh, they understood very well why people lived in cities, pooling their small forces palpably so that a turbulent, ceaseless, diversified river of force should tear them along, so that its mighty roar should deafen them to the faintness of their individual rhythms, so that from the resonance of its composite power they might extract some slight vibration of strength in their weakness.

Late at night they would return, clambering up the musty stairs that had only one pale bulb to light them, halting at the silent door. Before Anita could use her key, it opened on an interior permeated with warmth and electricity, framing Grace in the doorway, a Grace

glad to see them, tired of being alone. Or they would find her tapping out the last words on the typewriter. A bag of hard candies was spilled on the shabby gray paint of the table among a clutter of sheets. The terse light summed up her hair and her cheeks and her plain tan jersey dress, her "office uniform," leather-belted and collarless. But no laconism of light could squelch the soft glow of her hair, eyes, skin, and the beads at her throat. She would shuffle the last sheet in with the others and turn, stretching, satisfied. "Look. I did eight pages to-night."

And, if she were not expecting Blake, who objected to the smell of smoke about her, she would ask for a cigarette and relax and give them her news. She always had some news. "Blake asked Letty to choose my Christmas present with him. It's his own idea. Guess what? A diamond wrist watch!" She sniggered lengthily. "I really didn't expect—what we said the other night to have *that* effect."

Or:

"I had to buy Christmas things for Blake's child to-day. And what a job that was, too! Still, it's not so bad as Ruth Frick. *She* has to help choose—*hats*—for Carl's *wife*."

Sometimes she would put her finger to her lip, and after a silence they would become aware of a pounding next door. It was the lady-next-door, of whose profession they could not help acquiring some knowledge, quarreling with her Jack. "He's been hammering on the door and threatening to kill her all evening," murmured Grace.

Between giggles and in hushed accents, they speculated on the possibility of a murder. Grace always followed murder trials in the papers with an absorbed curiosity, with an open and defiant understanding of the ways in which the skeins of a life might be so tangled as to importune that sort of cutting. She had once told Anita how, in the early days of her love for Blake, wrought up to a final frenzy of harassment by her mother's insistence, she had grabbed a kitchen knife against her.

Then Dennis would insist that one of them read aloud from a poetry anthology. He had a racial streak of artistry, formless and unformulated, as all his ideas and opinions were, and though he preferred Francis Thompson and Clarence Mangan, he could listen tirelessly to almost any sort of poetry. If neither Grace nor Anita would read, he would read himself, in a stumbling singsong, mispronouncing or eliding half the words. But if he came to a line or verse that struck him—Anita noticed how often it was apt to be an admirable line—he would raise his voice as his only way of giving unusual expression.

This was on nights when Dennis remained actually sober throughout. On other nights he appeared to escort Anita to dinner a little "mellow," after his description, became more mellow in some restaurant where he was known and served accordingly, and could not be prevented from finishing the evening in a speakeasy. Anita, in order to avoid a scene in public, would be obliged to let him see her home.

Dennis would then take up his station on the couch

and announce that he meant to spend the night. Wilting a little under stony stares and firm commands, he would plead with much native pathos that he felt "so womanless" when he woke up of mornings, sick, in his hotel room. At first Grace was on his side; she advised caution but she was ready to put her tolerance on record. Soon, however, she also became obdurate, because she had learned something of the female company which Dennis kept intermittently. Grace would have pitied Anita if Dennis had been swerved from her by more imposing attachments and she would have been far more interested in Dennis, but nothing lowers a man so much in the eyes of most women as the fact that he is attracted by her inferiors. No humiliation is more resented by a woman in love, at once removing her triumph over other women in at least having set up for her lover a criterion to which all those others must conform hereafter, and at the same time forcing her to brush elbows in his memories with women she would not choose to associate with in actuality.

Grace felt a bit patronizing toward Anita. Whatever Blake's faults were, he did have good taste in women. Still, she thought Anita had better hold on to Dennis. Since men are not like foxes and the scent of the last victim merely makes the trap more alluring, he might at least be used to catch more eligible admirers. Only, Anita, not notable for patience, saw so much of him that Grace was curious about the exact state of her emotions. She would have been surprised to learn that Anita had plenty of patience of a sort, that she could bear any set of circumstances provided she had marked

off in her mind, like a date in a calendar, when it should end.

The novel was finished in April. After Grace had found a striking title by searching through volumes of familiar quotations, it was delivered.

Then, Grace made up her mind to go abroad. The time was propitious. For expenses, she had her advance on the novel. She knew someone who would get her concessions from a steamship company. Things were very dull in the office; a periodic wave of economy had swept over it from the coast and Mr. Graves would be thankful if she took a leave of absence without pay during the summer months—in fact she was afraid he might require this of her and so it would be best to anticipate of her own accord.

The only flaw was that she did not want to leave Blake. "These long separations!" she said sagely. "It has always been my opinion that one should—stick around." However, leaving thus on the crest of accomplishment, at the height of her glory, she felt that this would be the time when Blake would miss her most and most long for her return. This would be the time when he would apprehend how many potent affairs of her own might call her from his side.

She departed on a Saturday morning, amid all the rites of farewell. Grace herself religiously observed occasions for ceremony among her friends. She generally kept them for the reason that people generally do, not because she wished to exactly, but in order to safeguard her own ceremonies from the forlornness of neglect.

Blake stood somewhat aloof from the group on deck

of which Grace formed the focal point. It was one of the smaller boats, and there were only a few conspicuous-looking passengers, "interesting people." Now and then some girl or a man by himself would glance at Grace, choosing her and approving of her as a fellow traveler. No one would have dreamed that her traveling costume had been gathered with so much thought and taste; still, just because its harmony was so simple, it caught the attention of more expensively dressed women, who wondered what trick of modishness lay in the crisp pleats of her navy-blue printed silk, its suède belt, and the stockings which were, after all, just stockings but which seemed so exquisite on her legs, so in accord with the soft and graceful lines of what were, after all, merely suède shoes.

Mrs. Kline, who dressed well herself but with no such imaginative attuning to the event as Grace, could be seen gloating over Grace's "outfit," Grace's companions, and Grace's "friend," her title for Blake. Mrs. Kline knew him now. She even took a veiled semi-proprietary interest in him, as token of her approval, always asking after his health and his activities, especially now that his plays had been successful and he, a real playwright, provided her with free tickets to them. What inkling she had of the situation was not known, probably not even by Mrs. Kline herself, as she would not care to define suspicions which would force her to destroy her new amity with Grace and with so much of a personage as the playwright friend. Grace thought that her mother knew because she no longer questioned. To give Mrs. Kline a chance to further hide her head, Grace had sug-

gested that marriage was so unsatisfactory, in view of the comments that Mrs. Kline herself made, that she preferred her independence. Mrs. Kline seemed to agree. As Grace said, "She agrees—if driven to it. She prides herself on being very modern. She has to pretend to agree, anyhow, seeing how—extraordinarily unsuccessful her own marriage was. And it was one of those real love matches too! She tells all her friends it's only—natural —I should hesitate."

At the sound of the first warning, Mrs. Kline proudly ceded Grace's final farewell to Blake. They clung together in wordless last promises, in last assurances drawn from each other's lips and arms. Mrs. Kline, keeping her eyes carefully off the pair, looked from one to the other of Grace's friends with a touching triumph. They might be safely married, but which of them would be relinquished—and only for a few weeks, too—so unwillingly?

Blake was tight-lipped. It was the first time that *he* had been left behind, not Grace. Without waiting for the others, he plunged from the leave-taking directly into the crowd that shoved down the gangplank.

Grace delayed Letty for a moment. "Look after him, will you? Make dates with him, Let." She had asked them all to "take care of him," partly so as to feel that he was safe within the bosom of her circle, partly because she was really worried lest he be left alone. It was Grace who had welded both of them into the group by her greater sociability that thus became another asset since, if Blake were to lose her, he would miss her twice as

much, for herself and for the circle of companionship in her wake.

When the boat had gone Anita had the good luck to elude Mrs. Kline, whose eyes were swollen and whose tongue was feverish with the necessity for pouring out in sympathetic ears a résumé of the tributes paid to Grace. She set out for home, climbed the four flights of stairs, opened the door upon unexpected order—due to the efforts of Mrs. Kline, who had superintended the packing—and sank in relief upon the chafed gray velours of the couch cover.

They had no time to bother with the dressing and undressing of the apartment. Summer and winter—except for the time when Grace had had an orgy of repainting and the other time when she had added a gray carpet and a daybed in a burst of extravagance—the furnishings remained the same. The place was a bit close now. Some roses sent Grace too early and stuck into a milk bottle in the kitchenette sink were dropping a withered perfume. Anita disliked odorous flowers. She got up and flung them into a bright yellow waste basket and, as the basket overflowed with rubbish discarded by Grace, she set it outside the door. After a moment she rose again and picked up some bits of tissue paper and ends of twine that clung to the gray wicker armchairs. She looked into the bedroom whose dowdy odds and ends Grace had never thought it worthwhile either to banish or adorn. It was quite clear. Nothing of Grace remained. The furniture, the bowls and books and pictures, all of Grace's choosing and

owning, were yet neutral enough to transfer themselves readily to the personality of the present occupant. Even the photograph of Blake in a silver frame seemed to have been placed on the bookcase only as an impersonal adornment.

The telephone rang. It always rang, it seemed to Anita, when she had a moment to herself in the house. She did not feel like rising again. In any case there was no real need to answer it; the call was sure to be for Grace and Grace had gone. She let it ring unanswered. To Anita, who disliked the telephone, there was a great feeling of release in this.

She did not have to answer the telephone if she did not like. She did not have to go out, according to the unwritten code that had grown up between her and Grace; she did not have to go out even with Dennis, retaining him as an escort from a sense more of duty than of pleasure, because of a cowardly conformity to the social routine that was now expected of her. Grace's social scheme left no room for voluntary solitude for herself or anyone about her. Now that Anita was freed from it, she could see what a strain had been the constant necessity for going out, for making dates as a definite scheme of life, a scheme imposed on her, without a word, by Grace's example and assumption, by her own human fear of the incomprehension, the pity, the contempt, meted out to the dissenter.

Dates! Anita, having for nearly two years scrutinized a succession of dates—Grace's elaborate ones, as well as her own more modest ones—was sure that for herself the amount of effort involved in dates would be

too high a price to pay for any entertainment or any tributes to her vanity she might get out of them, or for any use she might subtly make, as Grace did, of the "dated" men. So much trouble! So much purposeful dressing; so much calculated listening and admiring; so much amiability; so much pliancy; so many bores to put up with; so many inane opinions to agree with; so many fumbling approaches to avoid or make fun of or be irritated by. And for what? For a meal, a couple of dances, a couple of drinks which like as not one didn't want, for two hours at the theater, for a telephone call next day or next week, and for the ability to exhibit the fact that one could entice. All in the wistful hope that once in a blue moon—oh! once in a very blue moon, perhaps—one would happen on a personality that was in harmony with one's own, whose companionship would be not a distraction from but an enhancement of pleasure; on that rare bird, a man with charm; on that even rarer bird, a modest man; on a conversation that required the activity of one's own mind; on love making that called for more than toleration.

The energy Grace expended on dates! The energy she expended on Blake! Anita understood that such effort might be expedient and no more onerous or even less onerous than effort spent on any other of the affairs of life for many women to whom marriage remained not only the most accustomed but the most profitable profession. But it was a profession which Grace's mind struggled to reject; she did not intend to be "only a wife," she proclaimed. Yet the obsession which possessed

her, that she must not lose Blake, the instinct which urged her to adopt every means to secure herself to Blake, which bade her follow him regardless—would that obsession and that instinct leave her much of herself to withhold from the common plate? Perhaps such an obsession, such effort, was inevitable. It might be inevitable to set one's passion on a pedestal, then break one's neck trying to get to it. Anita only knew that, for herself, in the midst of any love, no matter how enthralling, she would always retain a sneaking suspicion of its comparative insignificance to her. This suspicion was to her like the most trifling chink in the wall of a prison, unmarked by all but the prisoner, but to become for him the means of his escape. A fatal sense of proportion, the ruin of many and many a love affair, would always hinder her.

At present she did not care if she never made another date, never went "out" again in her life. As for Dennis, someone would marry him pretty soon, Grace said, "unless you hurry, the first little sap who makes up her mind will get her hooks into him." Which, Grace intimated, was a pity on general principles, as little saps with their simple certainties and serviceable rules-of-thumb were apt to get away with so much, get the best end of everything. For once, Anita thought, Grace was right. And she would miss Dennis, too; she admitted that she was not unmoved by him, but was he, on the whole, worth for her the bother of maneuvering a marriage or the greater effort of glamorous love as she had observed it? It was beautiful, she insisted to herself—it must be beautiful. Grace

and Blake were as devoted to each other as two people could well be. Only—only—neither could she hide from herself the under side of the pattern, which she had been forced to examine, the under side where there was no gloss and knots were tied.

Grace would say, of course, that she was a fool to "miss the experience." Grace quite granted that there were experiences other than sexual. She was skeptical of the theory of sexual experience as a sort of patent cure-all, particularly for the ills of women, with an inherent, magical power of enrichment possessed by no other eventuality, causing talented women to rise from the pillow geniuses, vixens to be transformed into saints, naïve souls into women of the world, and mean spirits into generous. At the same time, her imagination of the universe did not venture much beyond the realm of sex and she took it for granted that an experience was a certain concomitant of an action and necessarily nourishing.

To Anita there was nothing at all so inevitable about the value of an experience; it was merely the sum total of the delicate adjustments between a character and a situation, and that sum total might be for good or evil, for value or worthlessness, depending on the individual. She was influenced sufficiently by Grace's point of view to half-agree that perhaps she *was* a fool "to miss the experience." But the idea rebounded as harmlessly as a rubber ball from the granite common sense at the bottom of her nature. She simply could not see how a night with Dennis Meloney could make her a better woman. And the experience of marriage with

Dennis Meloney would certainly make her a more bitter one.

Before she went off to lunch she took a last reassuring look about the place. Nothing was there to question, to collide or interfere. She was free to leave, and when she was ready she would be free to return. It was left alone like all space, and when she reëntered she would be alone in it, as in all space. The thought clutched at all the unrestrained and unrestrainable particles of her being and tugged her upward like a balloon. At the same time she paused in fear, with a premonitory chill, feeling the first weight of solitude press down upon her heart.

Book III

GRACE KLINE ANDREWS

CHAPTER ONE

ONE Sunday of the following March Grace set out to walk from her house to Letty's. She had been waiting now for three months since the event which even Grace had never fully dared to expect and which had caused her incredulous friends to exclaim as with one gasp, "What a marvelous break!" Blake's wife was dead.

But still Grace waited. Even in her work she felt becalmed. Her job had chosen this time to vanish; her book had sunk almost without a ripple, and she could not, as ordinarily, generate within herself sufficient power to counteract these circumstances. The best she had been able to do was to maintain the noise of activity, to keep the engine whirring on the same spot. She went about indefatigably as usual; the difference was not

yet visible to the naked eye. She gave no hostages to failure; she wrote; she got odd jobs of publicity; whatever she economized on, she was careful not to economize on her appearance. Meanwhile, the circle of her friends stood about, cocking ears and eyes inquiringly and impatiently for the climax. They had been present a long time at this affair and did not hesitate to let her know that they would feel cheated unless it came to a fitting close. Renie Harrington suggested, when she had Grace up to dinner to observe with her own blue, ingratiating, cutting eyes, that "it would be so convenient to be able to put them at last into one bedroom on week-end visits." There were bets laid as to whether or not a marriage would occur.

Grace was taciturn. Drawing herself up with that retreat of her chin and advance of her eyes which had the effect of holding the other person at the end of a very long arm, she said with dignity, "I—don't know —what—our plans—will be."

Only Letty knew. As in the very old days when Grace had rushed up to the one-room-and-alcove harbor on Riverside Drive to spill tears on Letty's glossy spreads, and had cramped herself into the living-room couch of nights to cry in peace at Letty's house, so the road led back again to Letty.

Grace marched along briskly, decisively, but her cheeks were hollow, the skin drawn tense and translucent over them, while her eyes, twice as huge, the narrow coat from Paris patterned all over in orange wools and brown wools and held tight across her flat body, the gleam of queer, fragile stones set in spidery

silver at her throat—all these conspired to resolve her into a new aspect, to give her a jeweled, plumaged, bird-of-preyish look.

On Sundays, the maid's day off, Harold and Letty spent the morning providing their baby with fresh air in Central Park. Grace knew where to look for them, just past an entrance by a little summer house. Harold was reading the Sunday papers within, while Letty walked slowly without, keeping pace with her little girl. She was about two years old, dressed in a short green wool coat and bonnet, and she shoved herself around in a tiny pen on wheels. Grace looked her over indulgently, admired her with preoccupation. Then the two girls sat down on a bench, while the child jerked herself back and forth by their knees.

For a long time Letty listened, nodding now and then. Too many confidences were deposited with her; she was a strongbox to her friends. And these confidences were all so simple really. They all boiled down to the fact that the man one wants is always the most difficult man to get, and that was no news to Letty.

"It's not that I'm not—sure of Blake in a way," concluded Grace. "But he's so—evasive. He *won't* see."

Letty nodded briefly. "I know."

"Well, I'll tell you what I can do," she said at length in a matter-of-fact tone. "If you like I'll make a date with him and talk to him like a Dutch uncle. I'll tell him that he's causing you a lot of unnecessary trouble and worry and embarrassing you before your friends and that it really is about time he realized it. I think that should work. Blake likes me."

"Yes, he does," agreed Grace. Some such plan had been in her mind. She gave a long sigh of relief but added almost at once, "Don't be too—don't rub it in, Let. Be a little careful. You know—you can't—bludgeon Blake."

"Oh, of course," said Letty, shrugging. "I'll be tactful. Little Mrs. Tactful Fix-It, that's me."

The two girls looked into each other's faces. Letty's eyes wavered before the intent appeal, the clutching hope, in the countenance of Grace. She stared at the asphalt path, dejected, somewhat petulant before the present necessity and the final futility of her errand. Why did Grace have to *clutch* so? And she could no more feel why than one with full control of his muscles can feel why a person in a nervous spasm is powerless to unclose his fingers. She had to stop and search for reasons in her mind and from them argue herself into sympathy. She had to remember that to share a home with Harold and only Harold, to have him and him alone there in the morning and there at night, had once seemed to her the most blissful of all eventualities. Consciously there was no accounting for this sentiment now; the veiling, aching glamour effused from old times, old feelings, rose ever and ever more wanly on the horizon and ever and ever more imperceptibly faded like receding smoke. But far be it from Letty to counsel anyone against even the slight sustenance of distant smoke!

She said in a lower voice, "I suppose I might as well make the date right away—can't Monday; got a date with li'l Leroy—Tuesday maybe—and talk to him and get it settled."

Grace and Blake were married a week later. Blake had always liked and trusted Letty. Once she had set before him, with a directness that—as she was not involved—could be at once persuasive and unexacting, what Grace's feelings were and what his inaction seemed to mean to outsiders, he had understood. He was surprised. He supposed he had always intended to marry Grace, that she was aware of his intentions, and that therefore the need for action nullified itself. Some day he supposed they would find themselves standing before a justice of the peace who probably would fall from heaven before them at the propitious moment. He was rather resentful to be confronted with the reality of arrangements while he was in the midst of a mild, unmarried peace, while they were both free, he thought. Still, if delay made Grace miserable, he agreed with Letty that they might as well get it over with. He only stipulated that, lest his haste should seem indecent or suspicious to his parents, the nuptials should be secret until he had had a chance to "plant the idea" in their minds. Grace thoroughly comprehended such a plan. As for his state of mind, it no longer hurt her though it would always make her sigh. After so many years, she had still to scheme in order to convey to him subtly, so as not to frighten or antagonize him, what to her were the plainest phases of human relations. So it was. And so, no doubt, it would always be.

The morning of the wedding was dank and gray. Grace awoke earlier than usual, dressed in a sticky half-light, and tramped through the living room to bang the coffee pot on the gas stove. A good deal of methodical

noise always followed her risings and Anita, shaken out of sleep by the bangings and tramplings, stared at her resentfully from the daybed. Since the loss of her job Grace had developed a systematic mania for avoiding the purchase of meals. She collected lunch dates and she collected dinner dates and she had taken to fixing her own breakfasts. Anita could only admire the resourceful way in which she circumvented ill fortune, but in the mornings it was quite a nuisance.

The coffee boiled; Grace shut the bedroom door and spoke through the telephone, very low. By prearrangement, she was calling up her mother, who had exacted a promise to be at least told of the marriage. Grace said over the phone, "Ma? How—*are* you? . . . Well, I'm calling according to schedule. . . . Yes. To-day." She gulped her coffee over the sink in the kitchenette. Although she went back and forth from bedroom to bathroom to kitchen, crossing the living room every few minutes, she avoided Anita, who lay with eyes half shut and the bedclothes pulled tight and warm about her. The latter was accustomed to Grace's intervals of self-sufficient hauteur. They meant that things were entirely satisfactory with Grace at the moment and she had no need of encouragement. Anita would ask no questions.

There were three rings of the bell and Anita heard Grace trample through the bedroom, down the short hall, and the sound of a brass key in a brass lock.

Letty was waiting downstairs in the chill, early-morning grimness that overlaid the street. People passed,

silent, preoccupied, bent on work and nothing else. From the Fifth Avenue corner came gigantic hammer blows, hard, spiteful, even, one, then an—other—then an—other . . . then the long, raucous shriek, the bellow tearing raw flesh from raw flesh, of a riveting machine. Grace was aware for the first time that the old houses near Fifth Avenue, guarded by plaster statues of lions and angels, by moldy lawns and rusted iron gates—the house where Diana Reece had once had a studio, where Grace had gone to draw fresh, sheer stockings over her white legs on the way to new, exciting dates with new, exciting men in the days of Harry Strauss; where she had borrowed Dee's key and met Blake in the days when he used to return to Brooklyn for dinner; where Anita had once lived as a ghost—those houses had vanished and the steely ribs of a skyscraper were being riveted together in their stead. They must have been demolished some time ago but Grace had never noticed.

"Look, those old houses are gone!" she exclaimed to Letty.

They paused and peered up and down the street. Two new structures had been built across the way, where there had once stood a modest red and white brick hotel and some rooming houses. They were of sandstone, beetling as far as possible over the sidewalk, projecting as high as possible into the sky. They were tipped with gold and the long strips of windows straight up and down, divided by strips of sandstone straight up and down, glinted iridescently. The old brownstone fronts and the old red-brick fronts and the small, white,

rebuilt houses seemed compressed to suffocation between skyscrapers at the head and impending skyscrapers at the foot.

"The street's changing so," said Grace rather wistfully.

They turned the Sixth Avenue corner, continued past the El station and so down to Blake's house. Grace rang three times. This street was still serene with glossy shops composed behind their shut doors and their smooth displays, with a limousine dozing before the tall, white apartment building across the way and next to it a sedate little gray dwelling sleeping with shuttered windows behind a No Parking sign. All the speakeasies in all the basements of all the sere-looking brownstone houses were closed at this hour.

Blake came down rather pale and cold, a little hoarse, blinking. He never rose so early. They caught a taxi to the Tube station at Herald Square. Letty giggled. "We're off at the post," she said.

The train to Newark was not as deserted as they had expected and a headachy light oozed through it. What weird people to ride to Newark at such an hour —old women with newspaper bundles that somehow hinted to the senses of pickles, men in overalls with pitted noses. What *for?* "They can't all be going to get married," said Letty wonderingly.

Grace knew a lawyer, an old admirer, who had an office and political influence in Newark. She had arranged with him to prepare a secret way for them. They taxied around a gray-green park into a region of tall, sooty granite. Grace's friend was waiting in his

office and his car was parked on a side street. They walked to it, Grace with the lawyer and Letty with Blake. Recovering from the blight of the chilly morning, Letty hugged Blake's arm. "He mustn't get away," she called back to Grace.

"By the way, have you got a ring?" said the lawyer suddenly.

Blake had never thought of it. They halted on the sidewalk and laughed and laughed.

"You could use mine," said Letty. "It married me good and fast."

But Grace's friend stopped at a jeweler's and insisted on buying one for her. A thin circlet of white gold. "It's a wedding present," he declared with a smirk.

Blake was still sleepy. Grace was nervous and curious.

The judge into whose chambers they were ushered mistook Letty for the bride. When his error was pointed out he turned but languidly to Grace, appearing to feel that she would do as well. He asked each whether they had been divorced. It seemed that he had a prejudice against marrying divorced people. He was so sure there would be a divorce somewhere—"He smells a divorce," Grace murmured to Letty—so sure that he would not have to bother after all, that he hardly looked up at them before this question.

There was an element of triumph in replying that Blake was a widower. Even the judge raised an eyebrow and devoted one whole glance of interest to Blake alone. "I thought he was going to say, 'Well, aren't you the lucky guy!' " giggled Letty afterward. In five minutes the ring had been slipped on Grace's finger. The judge

noticed at last that she was good-looking and he kissed her.

"Ugh! One of those nasty, wet kisses," said Grace to Letty, scrubbing her mouth with a handkerchief the minute the door closed behind them.

The lawyer thought they ought to have a breakfast, but Letty had had hers and Grace wasn't hungry and Blake professed to distrust New Jersey coffee. The lawyer shook hands with them. He stood on a street corner, hesitating between sentiment and skepticism, and finally discarded the former as likely to amuse such sophisticated people. He wished them luck with a wink and left them.

"Well, you're married now," said Letty to Blake.

"I know. I've been married before," retorted Blake.

Grace and Blake were both disposed to be glum on the ride back. Even Letty was pensive. Though they joked and Grace sniggered and Letty giggled from time to time, the vows that had been uttered struck them all with a sense of disappointment. Beside the glamorous shadow of the unwritten, unspoken, yet irresistible promises that those two had been conscious of so long at every meeting, the vows, articulated at last, became disconcertingly meager and pallid, as a cherished thought, a lovely symbol in the mind, forms itself into but a sentence of the usual words, the common and oft-repeated figures of expression, when put down on paper.

Blake left them, after kissing Grace lightly, to finish his morning's sleep which the wedding had interrupted. Letty hailed a taxi, squeezed Grace's hand, and left to

finish her morning's duties which the wedding had interrupted. And Grace, that having been attended to, set out in earnest to find herself a new job.

As the marriage was such a very secret one, Anita did not learn of it for several days.

CHAPTER TWO

THOUGH it had not been discussed between Blake and Grace, it was taken for granted that the difference in their status would be only one of convenience. There was even a certain novelty, a certain spice, in the fact that they could now listen to the footstep on the stairs with the serenity of those who know that a wedding certificate can, hey, presto! be produced, like the serenity of a magician who knows that he can at will produce the vindicatory rabbit from his coat sleeve. For enough of the tradition in which they had been reared lingered on, like the rites of a religion in which no one now believes or the grammar of a language that no one now uses, to necessitate the devices of secrecy when both the reason for and the secrecy itself were gone.

A honeymoon certainly had no place in their ideas.

Soon after the wedding Blake and Jerry went off to Havana. Afterward, Jerry refused to believe in the marriage on this account; he said no bride would have let a bridegroom roam so freely. When finally convinced, he could not recover from the injustice of a state of things that caused him to have more trouble with the girls he didn't marry than Blake had with the girls he did marry.

On Blake's return it happened that Grace had an opportune invitation to visit friends opportunely far away. There was no reason for her to refuse, as she claimed the same freedom that Blake did. In consequence, when she came home their reunion crystallized into a motor trip with the Moseses. Grace was rather amused at the simplicity of a trick, not quite conscious on her part—and such an old-fashioned trick! She supposed she would have to plan for these marital vacations, exactly as Beatrice Fairfax advised.

Blake had bought a car. Years of suppressed desire seemed to lurk behind his proud engrossment with it. He would keep to the wheel each day as long as possible, ignoring the protests of Harold and Letty, who had had to bring their child, and becoming more and more irritated by the fretfulness of the child. Grace, too, began the journey by annoying him. It was raining when they started, and after lunch in a small Connecticut town Grace and Blake went into the first shop to buy a slicker for her. The rural shopkeeper looked from one to the other in some surprise when Grace opened her purse to pay. Blake pushed in front of her and threw the bills on the counter. He walked out

of the shop, Grace following, smiling, sighing resignedly to herself. They were so silent for some time afterward that Letty finally demanded to know the reason. But Blake would not answer.

Grace said quizzically, "It's because I can't get used to being—legitimate."

And, in truth, the restiveness between them had its source, as she guessed, in the uncertainty of her own attitude. She had long ago accepted the fact that Blake never wanted all of her at any one time, that he was scared and bewildered by and resentful, too, of any hint of a self that lay beyond the part which suited his mood of the period, refusing to regard it as another hue in the spectrum of a personality but considering it, in the way in which a man considers those traits in a woman which do not coincide with his own expectations, as blameworthy or inconsistent.

On this journey, the first they had ever been able to take together, Grace was abstracted with searching for what part of her antagonized Blake now, so as to eliminate it and substitute that which he might expect now. She had not thought he wished her to act "wifely," as she would put it to herself. Indeed, she had felt that while, with her, he saw no other way that could so fittingly make the world take for granted their attitude toward each other, the marriage had come before he had quite had time to think that he had decided for himself—that he was irritated by the idea of compulsion—and it behooved her to keep her state of wifehood as much in the background as possible. The scene

in the shop seemed to offer a clue of another sort. But it was hard to reconcile his offense at a small motion of independence before the world with the gloomy silence in which she remembered he had received news of the final loss of her job. She had not blamed him then at all, discerning in his silence his memories of an economic reliance that had oppressed him in the past. She was well aware that her attitude of self-sustenance in every way had been one of her chief attractions at first, in contrast to the then irksome attitude of his wife.

Not yet having come to any conclusion about his present mood, she took refuge in patience. She did not hear, she did not see, she was as unobtrusive as possible, she said nothing. It rained during the first two days in which they traveled about Connecticut and Massachusetts.

When they reached the seaside hotel that Blake had chosen, the sun came out, a glad and powerful ally that caused Grace to loosen her armor. She came down to breakfast cheerfully next morning, fortified by a marcel. Letty and Harold were feeding their child with a great deal of parental care and merriment. Grace did not mind. She was fond of the little girl and laughed as indulgently as Letty when the child banged her spoon on the plate or dropped oatmeal with a pensive preoccupation over the tablecloth. On Blake's appearance, they had all eaten and were sitting back, in the sun.

"Hullo," said Grace, quite forgetting her disguise.

And Letty, who had been taking her cue from Grace, commented briskly, "How come you're up so early in the morning?"

"Probably wants to get some golf. The links here are good," said Harold.

They all looked toward him eagerly to share their good spirits.

"I don't want to get some golf," said Blake with emphasis. "I did want to get some sleep, but Grace being one of those risers with the dawn, I suppose that's out of the question."

Grace's eyes turned slowly from one to the other of the Moseses as she adopted her special tone, at once resigned and explanatory, for Blake's idiosyncrasies. "Blake has such a hate on mornings. I tried not to make any noise," she murmured. "I walked about in stocking feet, honest to Ga-awd!"

"Is that so? They sounded more like bricks," said Blake. He examined her closely. "Was it for that marcel you got up? I might have known. That will be Grace's initial step on entering Heaven, won't it, Grace? As soon as St. Peter opens the gates you'll sweep past to locate, by instinct, the nearest beauty parlor, won't you, Grace? How does your instinct work in that respect, by the way? Is it by the sense of smell you locate them or by a sense of direction? Tell us."

This was one of Blake's humors which Grace recognized and knew how to combat, or rather how not to combat. She was even a little gratified at his acute observation of details concerning her; if habit had sharpened, it had at least not dulled his awareness of her.

She could even smile at the pungent truth of some of his remarks, albeit it was a rueful smile.

"And he used to rush up to me on the street and say how beautiful I was," she interpolated under her breath to the others.

Blake snorted.

"If you want to quarrel on your honeymoon, far be it from me to prevent you," said Letty. "Harold and I started ours with a grand scrap. Remember?"

It was Harold's turn to look rueful.

"There were some awfully cute bellboys in the hotel," explained Letty with a giggle, "and Harold thought I paid too much attention to them. But don't fight about a marcel," she besought Blake. "Save that for when you've been married a long time like us. It'll come in handy then. Now, it seems so—so picking!"

That last had been a mistake, as Letty understood instantly. Anger with Blake was a state of ice, not of heat. Instead of quickly bursting with it, he slowly froze about his anger, locking it securely within. They were all chilled by him, even the child who had been trying to reach his place across the table with her spoon. He glowered at her so that she began to wail. Blake rose and flung down his napkin. "I'd better leave this happy domestic circle," he said, and walked away.

Harold was too wise to open his mouth. Across the table the two girls glanced at each other and Grace shrugged so as to convey her bafflement to Letty. Nevertheless, she went quickly upstairs and subjected her face and hair to the mirror. Any criticism of her looks, even this which she knew arose from other reasons,

was sure to terrify Grace. The wave *was* a bit too tight. This reflection filled her with an unease which all Letty's reassurances could not still, which a pale yellow felt hat, pressed down till the brim met her eyebrows and, in the sun, enhancing her skin to a brilliance that made it a plastic materialization of the brilliant air and deepening her eyes to soft midnight, could not remove. Only the visual admiration of the lobby and the beach, the impression which she made on other people, finally brought back her composure.

She wore her hat hopefully to lunch. But Blake, though freshened by golf, still clung to his ill-will; there was no one like Blake for remembering what had annoyed him. As the child had been the last focal point of irritation, he surveyed her mannerisms very coldly. Grace thought it had been a pity to bring the child, but after all it was Blake who had planned this trip for all of them. If anyone's fault, it was his, and she rebelled against the shafts that, flung at her, she knew were meant for the Moseses and the child. Letty knew too and was tired of being tactful. "What an oil can of a husband *you* turned out to be," she said crisply.

The long day drew to the close which might have been foretold. Letty and Harold sat morosely over the dinner table; the child had been put to bed, and Grace was in a state of mounting and stifling resentment. She was so very quiet that she might have been on the verge of tears. Blake thought so. She went up to their room very suddenly. When, some time later, he followed, he expected to find her in that condition which would

finally thaw a mood of which he himself was tiring but which he had, from early childhood, learned to rely on others to evaporate for him.

Grace was just finishing her evening toilette. It always soothed her to look after herself physically. She slipped a barrette about her hair at the nape of her neck, smoothed down the waves which enclosed the now clear forehead, the cheeks that seemed rounder, in a sleek, soft frame. She was pleased with the effect and studied it for a few moments in the glass. She turned to him and would have spoken but remembered and swallowed the words. He spoke for her.

She considered the glass without expression, very still.

He spoke again with a sneer.

"All right," she said evenly. "You can torment me as much as you like. But when it gets too much for me, I have a way—to make you sorry."

He was so taken aback that he laughed out loud.

"What'll you do?" he said.

She made a small, menacing nod to her reflection in the glass. "I know what I can do."

This time she planted her eyes full on him, eyes so dry, huge, shooting such a triumphant brilliance at him from the hard pupils and the distended, gleaming whites, that he blinked. He watched them with a half-amused curiosity turning into a vague alarm. "Tell me. What will you do?"

"Nope. I won't tell you," she said. She curved her lips about the secret which seemed to give her a malicious pleasure. "Only, if you ever make me do it, you'll be sorry."

He remained silent now, she could see, really worried. Stealing looks at her from time to time, the set of her face scared him. And she was so dry-eyed. It was not that Grace cried easily, but he seemed to recollect that no fault of his, or at least nothing that had been a grave fault to her, had been revealed to her hitherto without his being able to measure the extent of her hurt and his pardon in the melting of her eyes and the upwelling and flow of her tears. Now he was at a loss. She had not been hurt—could not be hurt—as her actions and demeanor declared to him—so how could he sue for pardon? A phrase he had once used to her, in the need of the moment, not half-meaning it but using it because it rose to his lips, returned to thrust itself at him, to become fatefully clear—like an old prophecy. "When you don't cry any more, I'll know you don't care any more." And this explanation was so apparent to him that he grew quiet and pale with it. He waited, sunk in imagination, watching her move about the room, more and more anxious for some sign that might reassure him.

At length, as she made no such sign, he was forced to remind her of what he had once said. The words dropped from his lips involuntarily, as a tentative inquiry. But, falling slowly from his lips, stumbling across such a wide distance, they reached her, these words with their old associations, like old friends in some dire trouble whom one must at once, without question, comfort and aid. So she was placated.

He had behaved very well after that, Grace told Anita. She said with a smile that changed into the

motions of her deliberate snigger on further thought: "I had no idea what I would do, you know. I just said it on the spur of the moment to *stop* him. He was getting—unbearable. And—you know how—you can frighten a person more by a threat if you don't—don't define it? If they don't know just—where—they're going to be hit? Blake was very scared. He pretended to tease me about it afterward, but just the same I could see—he had it on his mind."

She paused. Her lips drew together in a resolute line and in her new, slower tone there lingered a trace of vindictiveness. She had just picked up a clock from the dresser and her fingers grasped it tightly as she faced Anita.

"But when he kept asking me what I meant to do, joking about 'my little mystery,' " she added, "I started to wonder what I really could do—if it came to that—what really would punish him. And now—I know." She halted again, savoring her victorious secret with her eyes and her smile.

She would have continued even without the prompting question, had to continue, would have ignored and overridden any interruption, like an actress finishing her speech regardless of all distractions.

"It occurred—to me," she said, and articulated each phrase slowly, "that—all I would have to do would be to go to his mother, who thinks—he is so very perfect, and tell her the whole story—how we lived together long before Edith left him, in what circumstances the baby was born, and why he *didn't*—get called Junior!"

She laid the clock down firmly on top of a suitcase and concluded, "She'd never recover from the shock."

"Oh, you wouldn't actually do that," said Anita.

"I might," said Grace with a shrug.

They were packing up to leave the apartment. Grace as usual "knew someone" who would take it off their hands, as it had been decided that she should move into Blake's place.

"I don't think I'll take that—or that," Grace said, flinging old things into a corner. "Can you use this?" She held up a dressing gown that Anita had long admired.

"What do you want for it?" said Anita.

Grace hesitated. "It's old—but it's still good." She was torn between her first generous impulse to give and the later impulse, fruit of experience, not to give without a return. Anita had always been careful, she hardly knew why, not to permit Grace's first impulses to win, never to accept without a return, and the return she preferred to make, the return that seemed to her least complicated, was of money. She hazarded a price. It was too much, but somehow she had always rather give Grace too much—in money—than too little. It eased her conscience.

Grace handed over the dressing gown. She closed the last suitcase. She felt a little uncomfortable about accepting the money, Anita could see, and when she had put it into her purse she said suddenly, with the effect of having found a way to make the transaction fair, "It's not time for the moving men yet. Let's go down. I'll buy you—a soda."

Anita smiled.

They stepped over the luggage. Grace searched for her keys. From the hallway Anita could see the sad, dead spaces of the living room—piles of shapeless furniture, heaps of miscellaneous débris.

With a final bang, the door swung to.

CHAPTER THREE

THEY were to continue to see a great deal of each other, as Grace was not the sort of old-fashioned spouse who is swallowed up by her husband's life. And at first she did manage to meet Anita often, usually when she was troubled and wore what Anita had begun to think of as her "bird of prey" aspect, the signal for some new worry or some new need. She couldn't make any dates, she confided in a tone which tried to be humorous while her eyes exhibited her very real concern. Admirers, both long-established and potential, had suddenly vanished. Or, if she chanced upon one, as she did several times on the street and in restaurants when Anita was with her, their withdrawal was obvious enough to embarrass Anita. They were glad to see Grace; they looked at her with pleasure. Then, when,

on leaving, Grace fixed her eyes on them and said, "Why don't you—call me up—sometime?" or, with a measured insistence, "Let's have—a date soon—shall we?" their uneasiness became apparent in the wandering of their eyes and the hasty indefiniteness of their replies.

"Do you see? They couldn't run from me worse if I had the plague!" exclaimed Grace.

Another time, at a dinner party, she sat next to a one-time boy friend who had not been entirely tractable in his day because of doubts as to her status. Such overtures as she cared to make now, however, had been circumspectly passed by. "My Gawd! You ought to have seen the *respect* with which he treated me," said Grace, with some alarm in spite of her satisfaction.

She applied to Anita: "Letty says it's because I've just been married and they think I can't want to make dates with other men, that I'm only—kidding them." Her eyes implored Anita for serious consideration.

Anita thought it might be so.

"If they only knew!" wailed Grace.

"Blake has a girl now," she said disconsolately. "A nice little chorus girl. He has quite a crush on her. He says it's such fun to use the old line and tell the old stories to some girl who drinks them in as if they were new." An indulgent smile hovered about her mouth. "I know—just how he feels."

After a pause she was struck by a thought which, it occurred to Anita, probably had been in the back of her mind all the time. She raised her eyes and tested the ground with her phrases. "I thought—I might even

start something—with Dennis," she said. "I'm that desperate!" She added, "That is, if you don't mind."

Anita could not help chuckling. "You'd better apply to Dennis."

"Oh, Dennis!" said Grace confidently.

But Anita was not so sure, since Dennis was in the throes of the very fate Grace had foreseen. The very girl of her prophecy apparently, a sweet, firm little creature, whose tactics Anita noted with admiration, had Dennis in tow, or so nearly in tow that it didn't matter. He went about proclaiming over convivial tables, "To think that a sweet little girl like that should care for a bum like me!"

However, it was not long before Grace came to call on Anita in a happier frame of mind; she had a job, a better job than the old. She wanted to borrow Anita's house in order to entertain a new swain that evening. Blake had planned to stay in and work, thus making her own home unavailable.

"It feels so strange to have to borrow apartments again," she complained. "Ironic, isn't it? For the first time since I left Ma I haven't—even a nook—I can feel is quite my own."

She looked around Anita's room with the disappointment with which it always filled her. The house stood in the old Chelsea district on a block that was still pimpled with tenement houses. Though it shone to the point of bedizenment with varnish and fresh paint, it was a rickety, meager little house. And Anita's home was so bare—bare floors, nearly bare walls, painted furniture and not much of it that seemed stripped to the

bone; color, charming and harmonious color, that decorated instead of softening. The vague, comfortable, and comforting quality in a room that makes one sink into it and wish to stay in it, the quality meant by "lived in," which has nothing to do with taste, which means only perhaps that the room is accustomed to people, needs them, is ready to adapt itself under their eyes to whatever they require of it—this quality was missing here. Grace was always a little on the verge of leaving in Anita's home.

The second summer of their marriage, the Andrews' went to London to put on one of Blake's shows. Grace's return was heralded by such a vigorous determination to get Anita to go apartment hunting with her and by such a mound of worries in connection with her father and mother-in-law, who had moved East with Blake's child, that the mere sound of her voice began to bring to Anita the immediate, warning reflex, "What does *she* want now?" By the following year, Anita barely knew that Blake had thought of taking a house in Great Neck, buying a house, perhaps, as Grace informed her dejectedly in the course of a sudden telephone call. This overture brought the same reflex with it, had the sound of a distress call from a proud liner to a humble little tramp steamer which never would have got the least attention otherwise. Anita had long ago resolved not to make initial advances to Grace because, unless these came at the propitious moment, Grace did not trouble to disguise their inconvenience. A remnant of gratitude still caused her to feel that she ought to come when whistled to, but she was so dis-

inclined that Grace had been compelled to offer inducements other than that personal company which is usually considered sufficient for old friends.

"Well, since you can't have dinner with me," she had said at last incredulously, "if we do take the house, you must come out for a week-end. I'll let you know."

Nor did Grace forget. Anita was an assistant now, instead of a secretary, and one day, in the absence of the chief, the employment bureau's press agent "hung" a story on to her. The afternoon that story appeared, Grace called up to congratulate and to give a definite invitation. It seemed more than a coincidence to Anita. What a perfect scent for success Grace had! Nevertheless she felt ashamed almost at once of so cynical an appraisement and scolded herself. It was kind of Grace to ask her out; it was indeed a long time since they had seen each other. She agreed to call for Grace on Saturday afternoon.

Grace was working for a theatrical producer and had her name on the elevator directory, her name on the door, a stenographer and a room almost to herself, concrete evidences of her rise which she felt she ought to acknowledge ironically so that no one could think she was proud of them or that they really meant anything to her.

A new musical comedy was being cast and, as Grace shared her office with the man who "saw" people for it, she with her appurtenances was almost swamped by a collection of show folks who stood, sat, chatted, were quiet, yet nevertheless had all the same attitude and the same expression—the patient attitude, the wait-

ing face. The man who saw people, of course, had not yet returned from lunch, might not return at all that day, as Anita heard Grace reply a dozen times within the few minutes. At the same time, she was carrying on a telephone conversation with the press agent for a charity ball who wished her to urge the cast of *We Are Three* to attend for the good of the firm—and the ball. While Anita waited, she concluded the talk, scribbled some notes on her date pad, and declared, "That's all I'm going to do for Sweet Charity *this* bright Saturday afternoon." She picked up a large, pale blue silky straw hat from her desk and made for the door, only to be summoned back by a fresh ring of the phone. It was the dramatic editor of the Weehawken, New Jersey, High School *Gazetteer*, demanding free tickets to review *We Are Three*. Grace rolled her eyes in despair and said politely that she was sorry but this was impossible as the show was selling out. "You see," she confided gravely, "I would be glad to—oblige you but I am not even allowed tickets for the daily paper people. . . . Yes. . . . Later perhaps. . . . Good-bye. Come along," she gasped to Anita, "before any more pests call up."

Once outside, she tucked her hat over her hair, using the glass of the elevator shaft as a mirror, and heaved a great sigh of relief.

"I can't bear to be around when there's casting," she said. "All this week I've been grabbing my hat at odd hours and dashing out of the office. They're so—pitiful! It's no good telling them Mr. Whoozis won't be in, probably'll *never* be in. They *won't* believe. And they

won't go. I don't see how you can stand having people come to you for jobs day in, day out."

"Oh, well . . . It's rather nice anyhow when you have the jobs to distribute," said Anita. "You ought to know. You've found work for plenty of people."

Grace sniggered. "Yes. Blake says I ought to open—an employment bureau on the side. I've even got into the bad habit of suggesting girls I run across for his shows."

She was wearing a pale blue silk blouse and skirt, minutely tucked and pleated by way of flaunting its simplicity. The color, so unusual for her, had by its novelty the effect of emphasizing anew the hazy glow which her skin shed under the summer sun, the gentle fullness which her cheeks now had. She looked lovelier than ever, Anita thought, and said so.

"That's a nice dress you have on, too," said Grace, scrutinizing the green of Anita's summer jersey. "The nicest I've ever seen on you. I suppose it's—by way of celebration?"

The warning signal jerked in Anita's brain while she hated herself for it. She was liking Grace so much at the moment.

"And that reminds me," went on Grace, "speaking of jobs and all. You wouldn't need—a stenographer—would you? My little cousin is looking for work."

"No. We've already got one," said Anita shortly. After a moment she amended: "It's not exactly in my line; we're only supposed to get work for adolescents or the handicapped. But I run across all kinds of jobs. I'll—I'll watch out for her."

"I'll let you know," were words Anita had sworn would never, never pass her lips.

They had still to call for Blake at a theater where he was rehearsing a road company of his last show—he now staged his own shows, Grace explained.

They walked a few blocks which seemed surprisingly gay and sunny. White structures had sprung up everywhere, taking the place of the squat old tortured frontages—a slender and glittering generation, slimly arrogant, flaunting a hard chastity of line in a sunlight that, striking full on every revealed angle, could not abash but only made them more shining. The theater was new and also white. The asphalt in front of it had but just been laid and returned to the sun a million infinitesimal sparks, as if it were set with diamantes.

They went around by the stage entrance and found some chorus girls issuing brightly and, just within the open door, talking to Jerry Barker, a man of whom Anita could observe at first solely the crease made by fat above the pink-striped collar of his shirt. Coming nearer, she was disconcerted to recognize Blake. She had seen less of him than of Grace and had not met him at all these last months. Hitherto, a slight expansiveness in his bearing and appearance, an ease of flesh and movement due to prosperity, had been attractive. But all Anita could think of now was how the flesh had finally spread and filled every inch of his fine gray suit. Her expression must have been obvious. Blake said almost at once, in the unconscious avowal of one who knows just what the fault is for which he desires to forestall blame, "I'm going to reduce." However, at the

same time he looked at Anita hopefully, as if trying to judge from her face whether, after all, it would really be necessary to reduce. To Anita's surprise, he remarked, "You look well yourself" (the first time she had attracted so much of social amiability from Blake), and asked them to wait with Jerry while he fetched his car from the garage.

They were waiting thus when the principals tripped out. All of them greeted Jerry and several greeted Grace. Then followed a few chorus men and finally a last relay of chorus girls. A few of these also knew Grace and waved to her as they walked into the street. One girl left her companion for a moment and dashed over.

"How nice you look, Grace!" she exclaimed, running her eyes over the large hat and the pale blue of the dress.

"Thank you."

"You look so stylish!" added the girl. "Real up-to-date," she pronounced with an approving nod of her head, and sped away.

There had been a frigid note in Grace's voice which did not quite accord with the quizzical glance she gave Anita. "I suppose I'm just another little-wife-in-navy-blue-georgette to them. Probably because I wear sleeves in the daytime," she murmured.

CHAPTER FOUR

ON THE way out, Grace and Anita sat in the back seat, Jerry in front with Blake. Grace said that Letty had been asking about her and that soon they must "all get together." Only, it was difficult to arrange for week-ends; there were so many people one had to invite.

Anita was embarrassed, sensing a subtle apology which Grace, in fact, did feel that she owed. Grace had always declared that when she had a house Anita would be free to come and go in it. She had found, however, that a hostess who wishes her hospitality to be effective is like a producer who must choose his players for the contributions each can make to the success of the show. Anita was simply "not the type." Grace didn't believe Anita cared. She remembered that she had asked her

up now and then for dinner when no other people would be present and Anita had not seemed very eager. Nor had Anita ever shown much interest in the crowd. But she certainly did not wish Anita to feel, because of the necessary gaps in their social relationship, that Anita had been dropped as a friend.

Anita turned the subject by inquiring after Letty.

Letty did not look so well, Grace said; her hair had a lot of gray in it. "She says all she seems to do now is take care of her child and sit around and watch 'us active people.' But Harold is getting to be—quite the ladies' man. He sends roses to Evelyn Linden whenever they have a date."

"To Evelyn Linden? I shouldn't think Harold would be interested in Evelyn Linden."

"Harold and Evelyn Linden?" said Grace, and took on her remote look of having and withholding secret information. "Is *that* going on? Oh, my! Apace!"

Anita knew of old that Grace's omniscience demanded an audience. But there was a tinge of satisfaction, almost of malice, in her tone which took Anita by surprise. It was almost as if she enjoyed the advantage over people of knowing something about them—liked to "have something on them."

"Evelyn Linden as good as told Letty," went on Grace after a pause, "that if it weren't for their friendship the affair would be—serious."

"And what did Letty say?"

"Said it was all right with her. But I don't think she cares for the idea especially. I notice she and Evelyn don't see so much of each other. However—that is not

why Letty looks as she does. It's because—she has no one now. She's hunting around, as it were. I've always said there was nothing like love to improve one's appearance," she concluded with unction.

Anita was aware that Grace glanced at her expectantly. She made no answer. She had begun to suffer from the same strange, harried tension in Grace's presence that she had felt at their last meeting, as if she were running a sort of race with Grace's troubles, flying before Grace's inevitable confidences, yet not being able to avoid glimpses of them out of the corner of her eye (as one subconsciously follows the movements of a pursuer) and at the same time being obliged instinctively to protect her own.

It was a relief anyhow not to be shown through the house, a temporary one and therefore, though lavish enough, not considered worth the showing. Anita had decided that the showing of houses was a mania inherent in suburbs, to which even people who would never dream of exhibiting a city apartment succumbed. She was grateful not to be forced to eulogize her surroundings. The living room was large and cool as a cave, with half-drawn shades and curtains of a thin beige silk through which the sun oozed yellowly, and the couch and armchairs, disposed about the brick fireplace, allowed one to sink as into feather beds. There was an enormous piano and an only slightly less enormous radio and a glossy phonograph from which Grace drew the melodious sorrows of a Negro spiritual. Grace had adopted "Water Boy" to be intelligently and critically ecstatic over as Anita recollected she had once

adopted the plump little f's of a well-known illustrator, and she insisted on analyzing the effect of "Water Boy" upon her soul as she had once insisted on analyzing the effect of the little f's.

They ate Virginia ham and spinach and marshmallowed sweet potatoes and a pudding of a golden flakiness that had slices of rose gelatin tucked into it. There was a white-aproned Negro cook in the background and a red-cheeked youngster, a "mother's helper," who waited on table.

Blake had apparently turned over his child to Mother Andrews (Grace's name for her mother-in-law) as the result of an old agreement that he was to be relieved of all that harassed and be tendered only that which could be enjoyed. She was mild, pretty, faded, with thin lips, and she sat obscurely at table. The boy, Jamie, sat by her and received from her, in an undertone, the few corrections which he disregarded with an almost exact copy of Blake's manner of disregard. Grace had said that Jamie was just like Blake.

He was still a little shy with Grace, and she was not so foolish as to throw herself abjectly, sweating with the anxiety for approval, on a child's mercies. She had once explained to Anita that she believed the best way to get his affection was, with a child as with a grown-up, always to leave some concrete evidence of good-will. When Jamie had first come East, and she used to visit him with Blake, she had never appeared empty-handed. She still returned to the formula from time to time. To-day she had brought him a book of stories and pictures of pirates.

After dinner he came to her side in the living room and took her hand, looking sideways in embarrassment and flushing a little, in token of thanks. He wished to have the pictures explained. The two girls put their heads together to concoct suitable versions under the watchful eyes of Mother Andrews. She said nary a word. But Anita, as Grace had managed to convey while they stood for a moment by the piano and waited for the others to leave the dining room, had used the word "devil" at table in front of the child. It seemed that Mother Andrews had revised certain words for Jamie. A devil must not be termed a "devil" before him but suffered a saccharine change and become a "monkey."

The child listened with wide-open, clear blue eyes, across which a flash, caused by a deep breath, shot now and again. They knew he was pleased only because he offered, with his sideways look and flush, to show them how he "took falls." They went to the door and watched him in the fading light tumble down on the cropped lawn many times and regain his balance gracefully, swiftly. "You'll have to disown him," said Grace to Blake. "He'll turn into a hoofer yet." Blake made a face. Hoofers were people he professed most to detest. The child looked from one to the other avidly, not understanding but sensing another reserve that perhaps ought to hedge him in.

However, in spite of his outward detachment, Blake looked up when Jamie was sent to bed and waited and bent his cheek forward for the good-night kiss. The boy went on to Grace and kissed her, too, then lingered

before Anita, who had lit a cigarette. It was the cigarette that held his attention. No doubt he had been told that every cigarette was a nail in one's coffin. He looked like that. At length he made up his mind not to notice her. He hastened by without so much as a murmur, turning and peering at her as he made his farewells to the others and sending her one last, clear-blue, reticent gaze from behind the banister at the foot of the stairs. Then he could bear it no longer and revealed the judgment which had been on the tip of his tongue. "Ladies don't smoke," he said.

Anita was irritated enough to ask, "Who told you that?" despite Grace's optic warning.

"It said so in a book," he replied securely.

"Is that so?" said Anita, less to the child than for the benefit of Mother Andrews. "There are a lot of other things in books. For instance, it says in a book, 'Children should be seen and not heard.' Do you believe that?"

They all laughed, even Mother Andrews, and the child himself saw the point and bent his head a little ruefully. But no one spoke. Blake wore an air of assent, rather than otherwise, to the child's prudishness.

Mother Andrews went up to bed soon after, making various tactful signals to her husband to remove himself also. She was very good about that, Grace whispered, in contrast to Dad Andrews, whom Grace liked better but whose delight in the company of young folks made him often far too stationary. He sat on for a long time that night, nice-looking, gentle, youngish, and rather wistful except when the numerous opinions he had

formed about the theater and the traffic situation, even in so short a period, led him to inject himself into the talk. Blake set his chin and ignored the interruptions until the constant calls of his mother from above finally tore Dad away. Then Grace, sighing with relief, wished to know what they meant to do with the rest of the evening. "Marie Drum wants us to come over and see her house," she said, to Anita's alarm. The men debated whether or not they would work.

"Or we might go over to Olive Lytell's," added Grace. "I had to see her at the theater last night and she said she was giving a party."

"Well, why don't you and Anita go over while we work?" suggested Blake with unwonted kindness.

But Grace said decidedly that she would not think of going without him.

They went to the Drums' after all because Marie and Ted Drum burst into the house to fetch them. Ted Drum was—had been—a song-and-dance man and had been featured in one of Blake's shows. He was dark, curly-haired. Grace introduced him as "one of those freaks of Nature who can't read notes and never took a lesson in their lives but who can play any tune on the piano by ear." Marie Drum rhapsodized on the subjects of furniture, landscape gardening, the prices of trees, and the difficulties of getting in touch with their architect. "He's not at his office for weeks and he doesn't answer his telephone. Of course, they say he's a dipso and his private life is smeared all over the place, but I haven't found anyone to suit us so well. The *only*

way to get him is to send him a night letter to his home, I've found. He's *got* to open a telegram."

"We must remember that," said Blake to Grace—and to the Drums, "I was thinking of getting him myself."

Finally, it seemed easiest to go and inspect the Drums' house.

All bungalows made of pink stucco were exactly like all other bungalows made of pink stucco to Anita. This pinkness stood against the sky, dark blue as it should be, and over the house a slim moon was poised, a wispy, silvery circlet. Marie Drum pointed to it with pride, as if it had been a stage property. Such a nice moon for a pink stucco house! Anita followed in resignation, observing the house from every angle, observing it from top to bottom, observing "cute" staircases and the patchwork quilt in the guest room and the Colonial furnishings of the bedroom and the polished purity of the kitchen and the rosy tiles and pink-embroidered towels of the bathroom, while Marie Drum tripped on feathery feet (she had been a dancer), in a huge black hat which never left her head even in her own home, tripped before them up and down stairs, opening doors and explaining antiques. Grace asked questions about the furniture, after which she made an excuse to Anita, "I may have to choose some myself soon." The Drums had overlooked no accessory that could contribute to their domestic pride. They had a dog and they even had a visitors' book.

The living room was strictly and stiffly Colonial. Balanced sedately on the high-bred chairs, one breathed one's thankfulness to catch sight of a grand piano—and

then a radio—and then a ping-pong set. And the white bearskin before the fireplace, spontaneous effusion from the hearts of Ted and Marie Drum in the midst of glacial floor spaces, was like a dear, dear old friend.

While Ted sat down to the piano and strummed popular tunes without ever having taken a lesson, Marie fluttered about, coralling them to sign the visitors' book. Grace took up the pen first, unwillingly, and signed herself, "Grace Kline."

Marie objected. "Oh, no. Sign your full name. What do you want to join the Lucy Stone League for?"

"I *don't* want to," said Grace. "I don't have to. I can't *get* anyone to call me anything but Grace Kline. When the grocer says 'Mrs. Andrews,' I jump. Really."

She peeped toward Blake, who was listening. "Well, since you insist . . ." she remarked and put down an "Andrews."

Marie Drum stood over her. "And write something —write something bright under Remarks." Grace hesitated, then added a dash after "Grace Kline Andrews" and wrote "—By Request!" with a flourish. She watched Blake read it and handed him the pen. He set down firmly, "Blake Andrews," and in the Remarks column he wrote, with a snort, "—By Command!" and threw down the pen.

Marie Drum had to ponder over the comments for a few moments before she saw the point. Then she burst into surprised laughter, calling to the others to come and see. "You little eggs!" she cried. An elaborate smirk was pasted to Grace's face. She was neither abashed nor hurt. It was nothing, she knew. He was quite com-

fortable, perfectly satisfied. This was just a last obeisance, demanded by the convention of his youthful creed, toward an unattainable freedom which it had been part of the creed to yearn for, but which he had sagaciously never made any attempt to attain and which he would not know what to do with if it could be attained. She sat down by Blake on the bearskin and closed her two hands over his arm in an arch attitude of consolation. They still had moments of embracing in public, or rather of staging their carefully burlesqued yet absorbed caresses, but these were no longer so compelling to watch, no longer acted on the audience as reminders of a love which transcended all obstacles. The audience was even a little impatient; after all, Blake and Grace could very well now embrace in private.

Jerry, who was a good musician, pushed Ted off the piano stool and began to play a song from the show he and Blake were working on.

"What do you think of that?"

Ted nodded and asserted that it ought to be a hit. It made him think, he said, of "Your Kisses Are Blisses," which had been their biggest hit.

"Funny about that," said Jerry reminiscently. "We had every song in the show picked for a hit but that. Blake was all for 'Is There Anything a Little Girl Can't Do?' "

Blake disengaged himself. "I'm still for that," he called. "It's a good lyric and a good tune."

"Maybe it was too much for them to remember," suggested Ted. "A tune ought to be simple, that's my idea."

Marie interrupted to say that this didn't always follow, naming one composer of many hits whose tunes were often complicated. They turned on her in mockery.

"Yeh, but what tunes!" said Jerry. "That fella knows his classics."

They began a rapt discussion of lyrics, tunes, what the public likes, and of what exactly had made "Your Kisses Are Blisses" so popular. Grace kept still, with her eyes fixed on space. During a pause she raised them and articulated gravely, "There's—something I thought —to tell you, Jerry." They all watched her.

"There's one thing that all hit tunes have in common," she pronounced, "whatever the other ingredients may be. They may or may not have words of one syllable, though they usually have. But whatever else they are, they're all—*definite*. For instance, 'Who—Who stole my heart away?' Or, 'Your Kisses—Your kisses are blisses.' *One* thing to settle in your mind."

There was a long silence while they all somehow felt that they should ruminate on this. Ted roused himself with an effort to prepare drinks. Marie Drum said, "We all go to bed early here," so they stayed only long enough to have some highballs and to play a few games of ping-pong. And then, since it was merely midnight, they trooped forth to a lunch wagon near the station to terminate the night life of Great Neck fittingly with sandwiches and coffee.

CHAPTER FIVE

A REAL-ESTATE agent called for Blake soon after the lunch-breakfast to show him some land. Grace, plumped on the couch, was a spot of orange severely vivid in the midst of the Sunday morning frowsiness of the living room—flattened, disordered cushions and untidy carpets; a small green bowl on the piano spilling cigarette stubs and ashes. She was scanning the Sunday papers to see which of her publicity stories had got in. Every now and then she pounced on a sheet, stuck the point of her scissors through it, and neatly clipped an item.

"I'm busy collecting li'l items," she said sardonically, "li'l scraps of pa-a-aper! You go with Blake, Anita, and see the town."

So, from the back seat of the car, Anita solemnly surveyed the town. There seemed to be quite a lot of pleasant green grass and blue sky and sunshine and houses on hills and houses at the foot of slopes and

houses along smooth streets and many vacant lots between. Occasionally, Blake stopped the car in front of one of the latter, while he and Jerry and the real-estate agent discussed its special virtues. They drove a good way out to a point of marshy land through which the Sound had filtered in pale streamlets and tiny pools. To one side an arm of the Sound stretched, long, blue, and deep, bearing yachts on its tranquil surface and many boats and a pier. Blake indicated the narrow fringe which was Sands Point Casino and another fringe which was Port Washington. A second agent joined them and stood with one foot on the running board, calling attention to the beauties of the landscape and suggesting other spots which they might see. The car faced the water, which drew their eyes over and beyond it with the insistence of all horizons. Even the real-estate agents gazed over their shoulders once in a while.

"Take Lake Success now," said one reflectively. "Been there yet? That's a mighty pretty country around Lake Success."

Anita, who had paid little heed, looked up quickly. The agent's face was quite blank as he went on to describe another section of this countryside. She glanced at the other agent and from him to Jerry. They were both absorbed in the talk. She grinned to herself and caught a sudden answering glint of amusement from a corner of Blake's eye, accentuated by the slightest turn of his head, so that it was like a wink between them. Anita at once forgave him the crease of fat above the collar of his shirt, blue-striped to-day.

They returned past a huge stone castle that re-

sembled a church. Blake halted before it and told Anita to bow her head in contemplation. "That's Jack Omley's house," he said, mentioning a wealthy lyric writer. "The house that jack built. Must have cost around two hundred thousand. I go and look at it when I want inspiration. It's a monument to book-and-lyrics."

Jerry clamored to be shown a house that music had built. "It's you lyric writers who make the jack," he complained.

After they had called for Grace and delivered up Jamie in terror to his first social engagement—a children's party given by Mrs. Saling, young wife of the producer for whom Grace worked ("And what a soft thing *she* fell into," remarked Grace, as they left the place with its curving lawn decorated by gay colored balloons and the party dresses of children) they spent part of the afternoon looking at more houses. An airy, delicate, wistful little gray cottage "that nestled," Grace said; white frame buildings with green blinds; bright stucco bungalows; houses as precise as little jewels cut out of glowing brick, with tessellated walks surrounded by clipped verdure; romantic structures obscured by trees on hilltops—all these Grace liked. Blake wished to buy a lot and build so that his parents could live with or adjoining them, while Grace preferred a small, separate place which they could use for summers.

They passed by the dwelling of a famous writer, humped on a hill like a white elephant, which Anita had asked to see, and—just beyond—the convivial house of a famous editor, where women in all colors of silk

sport dresses and men in shirt sleeves and men in tennis trousers were playing croquet on the lawn. "That crowd has a perfect passion for games," said Grace, peering from the car. She knew all the people and called off their names to Anita: the celebrities of a certain set in which she did not move though she had cast glances thereon.

Blake swerved the car and re-passed. "I suppose you want to get a glimpse of Raphaël," he said to her teasingly, but with a hint of irritation. Grace did not answer. "Or should it be Rafe now?" persisted Blake. She smiled a secret, half-complacent smile and looked at Anita. She said they might as well stop by and visit Betty Rose Crawford who had the lead in *We Are Three.*

"You might be interested in her," she told Blake and Jerry. "You know—Saling picked her from a chorus. This is only her second part. She sings and dances quite well."

"She wouldn't do for *Boy Friends,*" said Blake. "No name."

"Well, it wouldn't hurt you—to just talk to her, would it? And you *might* happen to like her."

They found Betty Rose Crawford with her hair down her back, sitting under a striped awning on a sunny lawn. She was being entertained by the young actor whose house it was and whom she hastened to introduce with due decorum as her fiancé, managing also to inform them that her mother shared the house as chaperon. She was very pretty, brown-eyed, brown-haired. A faint simper lingered about her mouth as she talked in a sweet, high voice with the Anglo-American stage accent.

She had the syrupy self-assurance of some stage children, and, sitting under the becoming colors of the awning, with her charming hair about her, sending her young man here and there for chairs and cocktails, chattering back-stage gossip, she put even Grace in the shade with her utter consciousness of herself as the center of attraction. She was the sort of girl who signifies her girlish purity and naïveté by telling, a little humorously, stories about children (little boys always) who lay flowers at her feet and old people (old men always) who worship her. After having interpolated into her talk suggestions of the many business offers she was always getting, she took them into the house and urged Jerry to play for her. He played some of the tunes for their new show, while she hummed them and laughingly took a few dance steps.

Jerry was ready to be smitten. On the way home he proclaimed that she was a sweet girl.

"She's pretty enough. But she wants too much money," said Blake thoughtfully. "We can get someone better known for that. Nancy Tuxson, for instance."

Grace remonstrated. "But she's so homely! For this show, it's my idea that a pretty girl who's not known is much better than a homely girl who is known."

Through dinner they debated the relative merits of Nancy Tuxson and Betty Rose Crawford and, upon withdrawal to the living room, they continued against a background of radio and Dad Andrews. Anita sat and waited. She had seized upon Jerry's announcement that he meant to borrow Blake's car and drive home that night with an eager explanation of how she had to rise

so early to be on time for work that it would be much more convenient for her to accompany Jerry. Grace's objections had been overruled. There was now nothing to do but wait. Jerry took his place at the piano. Blake chanted the words of a lyric that he had lately finished while Jerry drummed the tune to go with it. Blake, Anita inferred, was uncertain of the song and wanted to know what the rest thought. She said it was very nice. Grace, however, had heard the words before. She undertook some helpful criticism. It was a good enough song but it didn't "hit" her; she couldn't "be crazy about it."

"It's not up to the standard of the funny songs you and Jerry have written," she said.

"It's not meant to be a funny song," replied Blake coldly. "It's an answer or theme song."

He and Jerry busied themselves over the piano, Jerry strumming while Blake changed a rhyme here and a sentence there. They went on to other tunes.

"We might as well go upstairs," said Grace. "We're not wanted here."

"You might as well," said Blake, still frozen. Jerry, from the piano, promised abstractedly to call Anita when he was ready. She had no choice but to follow Grace up to her room.

Grace settled herself on the linen cover of the bed in a field of green wool embroideries. Anita lingered by the door with an anxious ear cocked for the first long pause of the piano.

"They'll be hours yet," Grace assured her. "Move a chair over and shut the door, will you?"

Anita sighed within herself and moved over the armchair of maple and rested her elbows on its graceful arms. There was a silence. She could feel Grace's eyes fastening themselves in full somberness upon her. She stared at a rag rug of aquamarine and emerald and apple green and rose.

"What do you think of all this?" said Grace directly.

"Oh, it's all right." Anita, glancing up for a second, repented. There was that somber appeal in Grace's wide-open eyes which she never could withstand. It was as if Grace's topcoat of assurance were blown aside by a puff of wind and revealed her for that moment in all her nakedness—living tissue eaten alive by all the ants of care and worry; living tissue, shuddering, covered with the cold sweat of subterranean fears. "Well, you know, suburbs were never much in my line—a childhood inhibition, I guess," she said uneasily.

"Were they ever in mine?" demanded Grace. "It's like a judgment on me!" she exclaimed. "To get away from Ma and uptown domesticity only to fall into the clutches of Mother Andrews and—suburban domesticity. You know Blake's idea, don't you? He'd be—perfectly satisfied to live out here all the time with Mother and Dad and Jamie."

"Not that I'd mind bringing up Jamie," she went on, "or even living here so much—alone. But it's *Mother* Andrews who brings up Jamie, and you see how, don't you? The way she brought up Blake! Of course, Blake won't see and I can't—interfere. But I have to watch it. And Mother Andrews! She was crazy about Edith, you know. And she doesn't say a word, but every time she

looks around the house I can feel her thinking—how much—Edith would have enjoyed all this."

She paused. Anita did not know what to say.

"And I thought Blake wanted to be free!" Grace concluded with a sardonic twist of her mouth.

After another pause she muttered, "I wouldn't mind being free myself—if you should want to know." She peered at Anita to see how startled she might be.

Anita was, in fact, a little surprised. "You don't mean a divorce, do you?"

Grace's eyes became huger than ever and took on the remote depths of tragedy. "I had—thought of that," she said slowly.

As Anita did not reply, she lowered her eyes, then refastened them to Anita's face. "I have—grounds, too," she stated. The effect of her words, the sudden lift of Anita's brows, was satisfactory. She added, "Oh, nothing I can actually point to! But—I have my suspicions. And I would have found out, too," she said with a reminiscent giggle. "I had almost got it out of Jerry one afternoon—you can get anything out of Jerry, you know—but Letty happened to be staying here and she came in and guessed what I was up to and jumped on me. She said I would resent Blake's cross-examining a friend of mine about my doings and so I had no right to ask Jerry about Blake's. I've never seen Letty so—*boiling* mad!"

"She was right, too," said Anita.

"I suppose." Grace shrugged. "I didn't mean to do anything about it. I just wanted to know. But I'm—practically sure anyhow."

"Well, it would be very funny for you to rave on the subject of marital infidelity," said Anita without further ado.

Grace was not abashed. "So Letty said. But I don't mean to rave. Only—one can get a divorce on that ground, can't one? It's something to know."

"And Blake has changed so," she continued more soberly. "Honestly, I don't mind this—not much. No, I don't," she repeated to Anita's slight glance of disbelief. "I get crushes too easily myself—not to—understand—infidelity, if it's only physical. You know I always did draw a distinction between physical and mental infidelity," she reminded Anita. "I don't—like the idea, but I can see how—some little chorus girl you don't give a *snap* for can *get* you physically. It didn't last long. Only I gave Blake credit for—for more fastidiousness. You remember the girl who rushed up to me Saturday—while we were waiting for Blake? That's the one. She's so—so coarse! And he's changed in other ways. He used to read a lot, you know, and talk about—things and now——"

"And he's getting fat," she sighed.

Anita thought that the piano had stopped below, but as soon as she half-rose she heard it again. The words that had been shaping themselves in her mind at last forced themselves impatiently past her tongue. "Oh, it's not really so bad," she said. "Aren't you rather dramatizing all this?"

There was a sudden movement of Grace's eyes; deliberate and velutinous, they stared into Anita's—simple, as simple as opalescent windows uncurtained to the

world because they need no curtains to hide their interiors, presenting surfaces full of light and an embossed blankness behind which anything may be fancied and anything lurk. "I suppose so," said Grace, and smiled.

The eyes of the two girls met without passing each other, leaving them no wiser in words or in the mind, wiser only in inarticulate imagination. The moment fled and they could not recall just what it was they had tried to understand but they were pleased nevertheless. Some of the present constraint vanished and they talked for a while almost as they had in the old days when, just before going to bed of nights, they had undertaken to clarify to each other and to visualize each other's universes.

"Not that I don't admire your talent for self-dramatization," Anita said. "It's by making oneself all-important and the things one wants all-important, after all, that one gets them. That's where I miss out. I never could make any idea seem important enough to bother about much, or any person, not even myself. Whereas you exalted the idea of yourself and Blake together and made everything and everyone subsidiary to that idea and—you got what you wanted."

"Not quite," said Grace.

She added shrewdly, "You always did give me credit for too much calculation, you know. A lot of things were just—by-products, just happened. I had some good breaks. But you're right, in a way."

She thought for a while, moving restlessly. "Oh, I suppose I'll—settle down," she said, and shrugged. At the same time her eyes began a new plea to Anita.

"Sometimes," she said, "I think I might as well drop it all, be a dependent woman and cling and live in the suburbs and all that. It's so much easier. But when you've—not been dependent for a long time, it's hard to change. And then there's Ma. I have to take care of her."

She went on slowly, with her insistent eyes enlarging themselves on Anita's face. "I could have a baby. I'd even—thought of *that!* A baby might—solve everything. I'd sit around and be supported and keep house. In that way I'd get rid of Mother Andrews. And Ma would have to—manage. Blake would get used to the idea. As a matter of fact, I don't think he'd mind so much any more. He's made a good deal of money, you know—and he thinks he may get a movie contract—soon—which will mean more."

She paused expectantly. Anita was about to dismiss the subject with a prosaic, "Well, why don't you have a baby then?" but this sounded too brusque even to herself. She said instead, "Blake might not mind, but don't you think you might?"

"Oh—I don't know," said Grace. "I used to be so ambitious. But sometimes I think all I want—is to sink way down, to have an easy life, a soft life, money, clothes, good times, not be so—taut all the time with work and Blake and mother-in-law. I'd like to find some way of—abandoning myself!"

She said in a lower voice, while an expression faintly complacent, faintly defiant hovered about her mouth, and her eyes acted as a searchlight on Anita's face: "I've been—making a few experiments along those lines, if

you should—care to know. I seem to be—more sensual —than I used to be."

Anita didn't care to know and hurried from the verge of further confidences. "Well, abandon is something one certainly can't plan anyhow. The minute you plan it, it isn't abandon."

There was another long silence. Grace sat there, her feet dangling, her hands in her lap. And at length the words which Anita had felt would be spoken some time that night emerged from her lips:

"All the same, I wish—Edith hadn't died."

They seemed to linger for an instant on the air.

"It was all so much better then," Grace said. "She would have got a divorce in time," she explained quickly. "She would have kept the child, you see, and I —wouldn't be in for all this mess of domesticity."

" 'Ah! the good old days when I was so unhappy,' " quoted Anita. She rose and stretched. She was somewhat contrite to be so eager to go and, turning to Grace, she added, "But I don't think you and Blake will break up. I hope not. It would be such a pity."

"No," said Grace, "I don't think so either." She shook her head.

"I don't really believe I'll ever give Blake up," she admitted quietly.

And these, Anita thought, were the most sincere words that Grace had uttered. Less than most people would she be able to concede that any drama, in which she had fought and agonized and plotted to build up a principal part, could ever be trivial.

Something in her attitude, so still at the moment, sum-

moned from the past a wraith that rose and fringed and shielded like smoke the familiar contours of her sweater dress; her clutching eyes; her long, pliant lips held together with just a trace of hauteur. Did she remember? Did she remember a girl with big eyes in a thin face, twisting a handkerchief tight enough to tear it, twisting and tearing with fingers like teeth, and another girl keeping quiet as a mouse from sympathy that was greater without words? Was she thinking perhaps that the misery of that moment had all been wasted? Or was the misery of that moment some subtle sustenance to her? Did it have its part in the veiling, aching glamour effused from old times, old feelings, thus softening now and then the troubled insistence of her eyes?

"You know," said Grace, "I really—believe—I wouldn't mind having a baby. It wouldn't interfere so much with my work. I needn't have a job. I could—write. And then it would be—an experience. What do you think?"

The air of the suburban night filled the interim with the nauseous singings of mosquitoes and the chitter of insects. Surely Jerry must be through! She must get home to-night! And the pressure of Anita's boredom and her distaste was so great that she had an instant when she could feel her nerves squeezed out of her and swimming before her eyes: infinitesimal iridescent worms swimming in liquid air before her.

THE END

OTHER

Best-Sellers

published by

DOUBLEDAY DORAN

THE AUTOCRACY OF MR. PARHAM. *H. G. Wells*

VERY GOOD, JEEVES
P. G. Wodehouse

MARGARET YORKE
Kathleen Norris

APRIL FOOLS
Compton Mackenzie

SON OF THE FORESTS: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY
James Oliver Curwood

RUTLEDGE TRAILS THE ACE OF SPADES
William MacLeod Raine

SANDERS OF THE RIVER
Edgar Wallace

HEART OF THE NORTH
William Byron Mowery

FIRE OF YOUTH
Margaret Pedler

A LITTLE FLAT IN THE TEMPLE. *Pamela Wynne*

BEHIND THE MONOCLE
J. S. Fletcher

LOVEJOY
Beatrice Burton

This is a brand NEW book

published at the brand New Price that is sweeping the country!

They've come—and conquered . . . the new low-price books! Hardly ever before has a publishing step been received with more rousing public enthusiasm and response than this innovation from Doubleday, Doran & Co.

The sound economics of lowering the cost of an entire list of popular and distinguished fiction not only won immediate endorsement from a greatly enlarged reading audience, but also assured the new prices as a *permanent policy*.

Lower prices, however, do not necessitate any lowering whatever of the standards of good bookmaking. You can tell that from this book. They are all full library size; printed, bound and jacketed just as before. In your hands they yield that satisfying, durable "feel" of a good book, made with taste and individualism.

They are not reprints—not "publisher's overstock," All new—just published—by famous authors. Look over the list of these books to fit your budget, on the inside back flap. Here are new titles selected from among the best of today's fiction, which you can't afford to miss—priced within the reach of every reader.

Doubleday, Doran